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ABSTRACT

The use of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) within work organizations in the United Kingdom was examined in a study of 15 large employers. Human resources development managers and NVQ candidates within each firm were interviewed/surveyed as were the individuals responsible for NVQ implementation at six firms. Only a few employers had disseminated information about NVQs widely, and only employees who had been involved in NVQ activity as assessors or candidates were likely to know about them. Although many employers were clear about a number of important potential benefits of NVQs, they were also usually aware of the major costs associated with delivery of NVQs and had reservations about the suitability of NVQs for the job and work force. Among the employees and trainees surveyed (272 usable responses), the most popular reason for working toward NVQs was to get a nationally recognized qualification. Job security and career-related motives were also considered important by many respondents. Employers and employees alike expressed considerable support for NVQs and expected them to improve job performance and employee morale. The most common criticism of NVQs was their confusing language. Seventeen points of good practice were identified. (Appendixes include the survey instrument and tables detailing the survey responses.) (MN)

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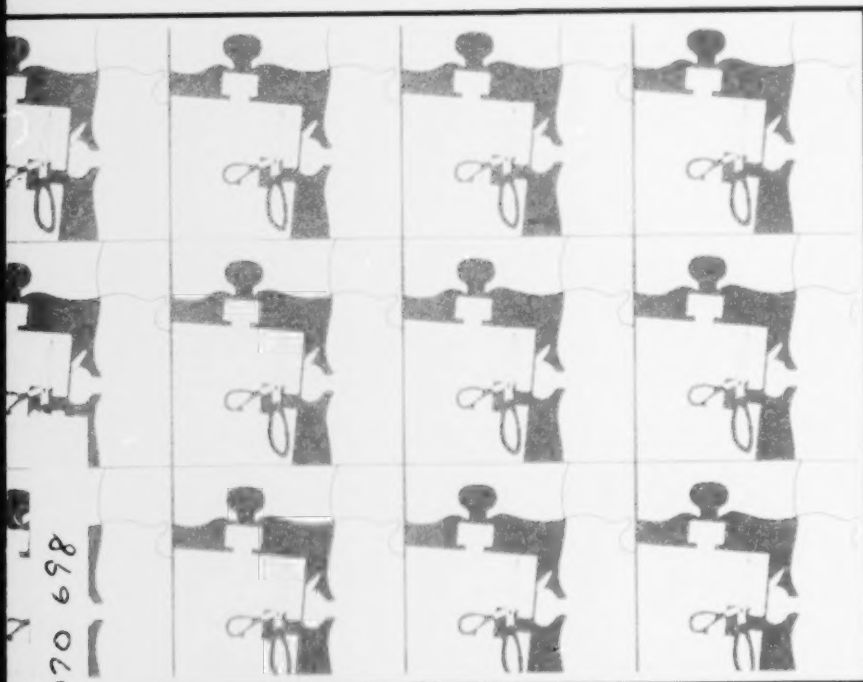
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IMPLEMENTING NVQS

The experience of employers, employees and trainees

J Toye, P Vigor



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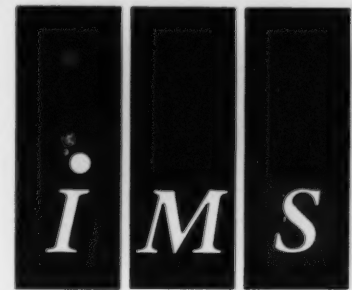
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IMPLEMENTING NVQS

The experience of employers, employees and trainees

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Executive Summary

Purpose and nature of the research

While many large employers have some experience of NVQs, decisions have still to be made about whether to become fully committed. The purpose of this report, which concentrates on use of NVQs within large organisations, is to help inform those decisions. It complements recent IMS research about employers' attitudes¹ by exploring the factors influencing employers' future intentions and reporting on the experience of NVQ candidates.

The research was based on the experience of fifteen large employers, and involved interviews with HRD managers, and a survey of NVQ candidates within each. In six of the 15 organisations, additional interviews were held with those who organise NVQ implementation on a day to day basis, assessors and candidates. The research was undertaken with the support of the IMS Co-operative Research Programme, through which a group of IMS Subscribers finance, and often participate in, applied research on employment issues.

Level of NVQ activity among large employers

A few employers had used NVQs for a large proportion of a particular occupational group, but in most cases experience of NVQs was on a small scale. Only a few employers had disseminated information about NVQs widely, and on the whole only employees who had been involved in NVQ activity as assessors or candidates were likely to know about them.

Organisation of training relating to NVQs and their assessment was done mainly in-house, though use of external organisations was important in a few cases. Use of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) on its own was rare. Training related to NVQs relied mainly on the use of structured work placements within the organisation, though work based projects for individual learners, open learning, and short courses for particular aspects were also used.

Assessment, carried out usually by line managers or supervisors, was based on observation, written evidence and questioning, the balance

¹ Callender C *et al.* (1993) *Scottish/National Vocational Qualifications: early indications of employers' take-up and use*. A report by IMS to the Employment Department. IMS Report No. 259

of these methods depending mainly on the nature of the work done. Assessors also had a role in training which, however, was not usually made explicit.

Future intentions

There are a number of factors influencing employers who were unsure about whether to commit themselves to using NVQs in the future:

- Could costs be justified in terms of benefits?

Employers were clear about a number of important potential benefits, and were also usually aware of the major cost associated with delivery of NVQs, *ie* the time of candidates and assessors. In most cases, however, they had no way of assessing the 'value added' of NVQs, so it seemed likely that the final decision would be made on other criteria.

- How suitable were NVQs for the job and workforce?

While many employers had reservations about various aspects of NVQs and the content of certain NVQs, they were inclined to live with these if other factors seemed right. However, employers were very reluctant to commit themselves to NVQs if the one most relevant to their main workforce was wrong in terms of content or level.

- Would NVQs achieve a high public profile?

This was an important consideration for many employers, and was to a large extent dependent on the level of NVQ take-up by employers in general. Relevant to this is a finding from recent national research,² which shows that take-up is low on average among all employers, but that more than half of large employers are using NVQs or plan to use them.

Employers would also be influenced by employees' attitudes towards NVQs which, as the following paragraphs show, the research found to be highly favourable.

Employees' and trainees' experience of NVQs

The most popular reason for working towards an NVQ, among the employees and trainees who took part in the survey, was to get a nationally recognised qualification. Job security and career related motives were also relevant for many.

The majority had achieved or expected to achieve the NVQ or Units they were aiming for, and assessment had been carried out mainly in-house. Almost all respondents had received some form of training in support of the NVQ, most of it being provided in-house. The great majority of candidates found both training and assessment

² *Op. cit.*

satisfactory. Interviews suggested that much of what candidates learned had come from the process of preparing for assessment under the guidance of trainers and assessors rather than as a result of formal training.

Employers' and employees' perceptions of benefits

The reasons employers and employees gave for liking NVQs were very similar. Employers expected them to raise standards of performance and employee morale, and evidence from employees through the survey and interviews supports this expectation. More than half the survey respondents thought that working for an NVQ helped them do the job better, and during the interviews candidates volunteered the beliefs that NVQs gave recognition of what the individual had achieved at work, and raised standards of performance.

A major attraction to employers was that giving line managers the role of NVQ assessor helped confirm their role in appraisal, coaching and supervision. During interviews assessors gave examples of how use of the NVQ had led them to communicate more effectively with staff and highlighted performance related issues.

Both employers and employees approved of the competence based nature of NVQs and that they 'happen in the workplace'. A majority of employees liked the fact that learning and practice for an NVQ can be done on the job, and agreed they would not want to work for a qualification which mainly involved a written examination. Women were even more likely than men to agree with those statements.

Overall, there was considerable support for NVQs among employees with a large majority saying they would recommend them to other people doing the same job, and a high level of agreement with statements stressing the advantages of NVQs.

The difficulties

The most common criticism of NVQs was that the language was confusing. Problems were reported by about one third of candidates with time, support and producing evidence for an NVQ. Trainees were less likely to find time a problem than employees, and candidates for Management NVQs were more likely than others to find it difficult to know how to present the evidence required, probably because of the nature of the performance criteria and evidence in question.

There was no clear evidence from employees about whether the match between an NVQ and the job was problematic, but in practice providing the evidence for rarely performed parts of an NVQ, or which had been done in a previous job, could be difficult.

Problems arising from the ways companies implemented NVQs included low awareness of NVQs among some candidates and line

managers, a feeling that NVQs had inadequate recognition, and NVQs taking up more of candidates' and assessors' time than expected. Meeting the requirements of different Awarding Bodies, NCVQ and SCOTVEC, was inefficient and time-wasting as far as internal verifiers were concerned.

However, some of the difficulties — such as assessors failing to complete their training, agreeing on an appropriate standard of assessment, and inappropriate expectations on the part of external verifiers — had already been wholly or partly overcome. It was believed that much of the difficulty arose simply because NVQs were new: a view that gains support from the fact that almost half of the survey respondents agreed that it was easier to make progress on NVQs than expected.

Lessons learned and points of good practice

The report concludes with a discussion of the lessons learned from the research about effective implementation of NVQs. The main overall message is the importance of good communication among all participants in the NVQ process.

The main recommendations for NVQ implementation are as follows:

Those organising the NVQ and assessment system are recommended to take into account the need to:

- Integrate NVQs into the wider organisational strategy
- Introduce NVQs initially on a pilot basis
- Plan the stages by which NVQs will be further implemented
- Take the level of long term need into account when deciding whether to train assessors in-house
- Provide a support system for line managers and supervisors who are training as assessors
- Provide adequate information for all those who are likely to be affected by NVQ activity.

Those working directly with candidates are recommended to:

- Consider whether there is value for a particular NVQ and group of candidates in re-writing the NVQ into simpler language
- Be honest about the time NVQs are estimated to take up during working hours and from employees' own time, and monitor the time it actually takes
- Draw up with each individual a manageable action plan which will enable them to make progress on just one Element or Unit in the first instance
- Ensure candidates maintain the momentum by encouraging them to keep in touch with others who are working towards the NVQ, for instance through self-help groups, and setting targets

- Make sure that achievement of an NVQ always gets public recognition.

Those responsible for quality assurance are recommended to:

- Be sure that assessors have enough knowledge and experience of the occupation to be able to make valid assessments of competence
- Make it clear that assessors are expected to be properly prepared for carrying out assessments
- Provide means by which assessors can compare notes on how they are interpreting NVQs and the standards they are using, and ensure that feedback from the verification system is communicated to them
- Encourage group working among candidates and assessors, both for quality of outcomes and good use of time.

Those responsible for keeping the system running are recommended to:

- Investigate computerised systems for putting candidates and assessors in touch with each other if large numbers of people are involved in different locations
- Combine the keeping of records with a system for maintaining contact with candidates and assessors.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and objectives

Most employers, especially large ones, have heard of National Vocational Qualifications¹ (NVQs), and many have started using them, but their use is still far from generally established. Many large employers are aware of the increasing level of take-up and feel the time has come either to get involved for the first time or, if they have already become involved on a small scale, to make decisions about their future nature and level of use.

The purpose of this report, which concentrates on use of NVQs within large organisations, is to help inform those decisions. It complements recent research about employers' attitudes² by exploring the factors influencing employers' future intentions and reporting about the experience of employees and trainees who have been NVQ candidates. It was undertaken with the support of the IMS Co-operative Research Programme, through which a group of IMS Subscribers finance, and often participate in, applied research on employment issues.

The objectives of the study were to:

- report on the extent of NVQ implementation within large employers
- describe how NVQs are being used, any difficulties encountered, and what employers perceive as their benefits and costs
- describe the experience of NVQ candidates and their attitudes towards NVQs
- summarise what has been learned about the practicalities of implementing NVQs by training personnel, by the candidates themselves, and by the line managers and supervisors acting as assessors.

¹ Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) in Scotland.

² Callender C, Toye J, et al. (1994) *National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications: early indications of employers' take-up and use*. A report by IMS to the Employment Department.

1.2 Method

The report is based on the experience of fifteen employers all of whom have used NVQs.

Case studies and interviews

Case studies were carried out within six organisations, five being national organisations and one an NHS health trust. The number of employees ranged from 4,000 to 170,000.

The research involved:

- interviews with company training and/or HRD managers who have overall responsibility for NVQ policy and those with day to day management of NVQ dissemination and assessment
- interviews or group discussions with line managers or supervisors involved in carrying out NVQ assessment
- interviews or group discussions with employee and trainee NVQ candidates.

Information about training managers' policy and practice on NVQs was available from interviews within an additional nine organisations consulted in connection with another study about NVQs³.

Survey

A postal questionnaire was designed for employees and trainees who had experience of working towards an NVQ. Training managers in all fifteen organisations distributed copies to employees and/or trainees who had either been registered for or achieved an NVQ. This report is based on the 272 usable replies we received from 15 organisations.

Further details about the survey are given in Appendix 1.

1.3 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 provides a brief description of NVQs, what they are and how they are used. This will be more relevant to readers with no experience of using NVQs.

Chapter 3 describes the level and nature of NVQ activity among employers, and Chapter 4 the factors influencing whether or not they will invest in NVQs on a large scale in future.

Chapter 5 reports on the survey of NVQ candidates, their experience and attitudes, and Chapter 6 on interviews with candidates, assessors

³ Callender C, Tovey J. *Op. cit.* We are grateful to the Employment Department for permission to use these data.

and those responsible for organising assessment about the benefits and drawbacks of NVQs.

Finally Chapter 7 outlines what has been learned from the study about good practice in the implementation of NVQs.

2. NVQs: What They Are and How They Are Used

This chapter describes the nature of NVQs and provides an outline of how they are used in practice. It introduces key terms which are used elsewhere in the report, and which are listed in the glossary.

Illustrations of how an NVQ works in practice are given from one NVQ, Customer Service Level 3.

2.1 The aims and nature of NVQs

The Government announced a programme to introduce a system of National Vocational Qualifications in 1986, the intention being to provide qualifications for all vocational areas on a similar basis. The overall aim was to provide a sound basis for vocational education and training in order to raise the level of skills in the workforce as a whole.

The new system was intended to achieve that aim by:

- providing 'a clear, coherent and comprehensive system of vocational qualifications'¹ in place of existing qualifications, which in some cases were competing, for some areas non-existent, and often not recognised by employers
- basing the award of a qualification on the assessment of competence directly relevant to the needs of employment and the individual.

Under the system which has developed to meet these aims, an individual's competence is judged in terms of his or her ability to **perform** a range of work related activities — skills, knowledge and understanding are relevant only in so far as they are relevant to competence. Performance, ideally, is assessed under normal working conditions.

Award of a qualification is based on the candidate's performance to the required standard at the point of assessment, and typically includes observation of the candidate performing a particular part of the job. An important difference between an NVQ and traditional forms of vocational qualification is that an NVQ makes no requirement about the manner in which a person learns to perform to

¹ *Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales — A Report by the Working Group*, Crown Copyright 1986. This report provided the basis on which NVQs were developed.

the specified standard — for instance, in terms of number of hours' attendance at a course or the completion of a particular syllabus.

Because the system ultimately will cover all occupations, and because in practice NVQs have been developed for occupations where none or few were available in the past, it is expected to improve access to qualifications and equality of opportunity. Also relevant to this aspect is the fact that NVQs are intended to be transferable between different occupational areas. Thus the relevant part of a qualification for skills gained in one job — for example, reception work in a catering setting — would be recognised, say in the health service, for a job which also involved reception work skills.

The Customer Service NVQ illustrates these features. In the past there was no recognised qualification in customer service, an area of work which involves a large number of employees and which is crucially important for employers across all sectors. The NVQ Level 3 in Customer Service is intended for candidates who work wholly in customer service functions and for those wishing to progress from a technical background to a more generic area within the service function. Achievement of the NVQ is based on candidates' performance on the job and evidence acquired during performance of the job. Individuals whose jobs involve some of the NVQ functions can achieve the Units which reflect their customer service role, and those Units should be recognised by and relevant to any employer wishing to employ people in that role.

2.2 The organisations responsible for developing and awarding NVQs

The **National Council for Vocational Qualifications² (NCVQ)** was given responsibility for establishing the framework of qualifications, and also has responsibility for deciding whether or not to accredit a qualification. In practice it can veto proposals put forward by Lead Bodies and Awarding Bodies.

Lead Bodies (LBs) are intended to be industry led organisations, often in practice Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), whose task is to research the skills required and consult employers in order to develop **Occupational Standards** for a given occupation.

Illustration The Customer Service Lead Body consists of eight large employers providing a range of services from the private and public sectors. Development of the Occupational Standards and piloting of them was done by these employers plus others from outside the LB. That work was sponsored by the Employment Department.

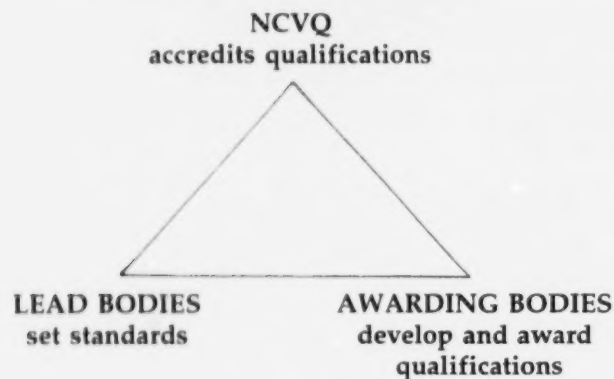
Awarding Bodies develop NVQs on the basis of the Occupational Standards. They deal with registration of candidates, design the

² The Scottish Vocational Educational Council (SCOTVEC) is the national body for Scotland. It has a wider remit than NCVQ and is responsible for developing, awarding and accrediting a separate system of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) based on similar principles to the NVQ framework.

assessment systems to be used, and provide external verifiers who check the standard of assessment before agreeing that certificates should be awarded. Many awarding bodies are traditional examining bodies such as City and Guilds, but some ITOs have become Awarding Bodies too. In some cases, more than one Awarding Body offers the NVQ, *ie* they are competing, and the user has a choice. Sometimes a Lead Body and Awarding Body offer an award jointly.

Illustration In the case of the Customer Service NVQ, only one Awarding Body, RSA (Royal Society of Arts Examining Body), offers the qualification (and in Scotland SCOTVEC).

Fig. 1 Relationship between the responsible organisations



2.3 Occupational Standards and their relationship to NVQs

NVQs and the Standards on which they are based are in principle available at five Levels, with Level 1 involving basic competence and the other Levels being in ascending order of complexity and responsibility. Level 5 is intended to be the equivalent of professional competence as traditionally understood. No occupation as yet has NVQs at all five Levels. The majority have NVQs at Levels 1,2 and 3, and a few occupations, *eg* management, have only higher Levels.

The setting of Occupational Standards is a stage in the process of developing NVQs, and in fact provides the essential content of an NVQ. Each Lead Body draws up Standards by a process of consultation in its sector, and this usually involves research in order to produce an 'occupational map', followed by a process called 'functional analysis' to specify what is required for all relevant aspects of performance.

The resulting Standards are in effect a summary of the functions of the occupation in question, presented at the highest level of aggregation as Units, which are broken down into Elements, and the

Elements are further analysed in terms of Performance Criteria, Range of application, and requirements for Knowledge and Understanding.

Illustration

Fig. 2 provides an example of an Element specified in terms of Performance Criteria, Range, Knowledge and Understanding requirements.

Fig. 3 shows the Occupational Standards for Customer Service, Level 3, in terms of Units (1 to 5) each of which is subdivided into Elements, 1.1 to 1.3 *etc.*

The Standards can be used on their own by employers as a basis for job descriptions, standards setting, training, appraisal systems, recruitment and selection.

Occupational Standards are converted into NVQs when individuals are registered as candidates with an Awarding Body. In order to achieve the qualification the candidate must be assessed in ways set down by the Awarding Body, which must also be satisfied that the required standard has been achieved. Candidates may also register for and achieve Units of an NVQ rather than the whole qualification.

When Standards are used on their own, without reference to NVQ certification, the employer has the option of adapting them in language and content to suit their particular circumstances. In these circumstances, if assessment is carried out it will be done as the employer wishes, without reference to external requirements on method. The individual employee in this case does not achieve a qualification or part of one, and has nothing to show outside the organisation that his or her work matches up to the national standard the NVQ represents.

2.4 NVQs: Roles of assessors, internal verifiers and external verifiers

Because organisations vary so much in their internal arrangements, personnel and job functions, the way in which NVQs are implemented differ too. So where the following outline refers to the job roles of those carrying out NVQ functions, it is not intended to be prescriptive, but just descriptive of arrangements which often are found.

Assessors are the people who assess an NVQ candidate's performance by reference to the Performance Criteria within Units and Elements of an NVQ as just described. The assessor has responsibility for assessing the performance of named candidates. This is likely to involve observation of the candidate carrying out certain aspects of the job, appraisal of written material, and questioning.

First line managers and supervisors of employees doing the work in question are likely to be the most suitable people for this role, because they will be familiar with the job which is to be assessed and

Fig 2. Occupational Standards for Customer Service, Level 3

Unit 2 Communicate with Customers

2.1 Select information for communication to customer

Performance Criteria

- 2.1.1 Relevant documentation is routinely examined for information relevant to customers.
- 2.1.2 Customers' perceptions of problems are accurately identified, checked and acknowledged in all communications.
- 2.1.3 Information given in response to customers' requests meets their needs in terms of accuracy, relevance, promptness and completeness.
- 2.1.4 Products/services which meet customers' identified needs are communicated to them.
- 2.1.5 Information communicated to customers is designed to protect them from unnecessary worry.
- 2.1.6 Information of potential use to customers is stored in the most appropriate place.

Range

Documentation:

organisational procedures;
products/services;
customer feedback.

Information:

originates inside the organisation;
originates outside the organisation;
routinely generated;
non-routinely generated.

Customer needs:

stated products/services;
unstated products/services.

Knowledge and Understanding:

Principles and methods relating to:

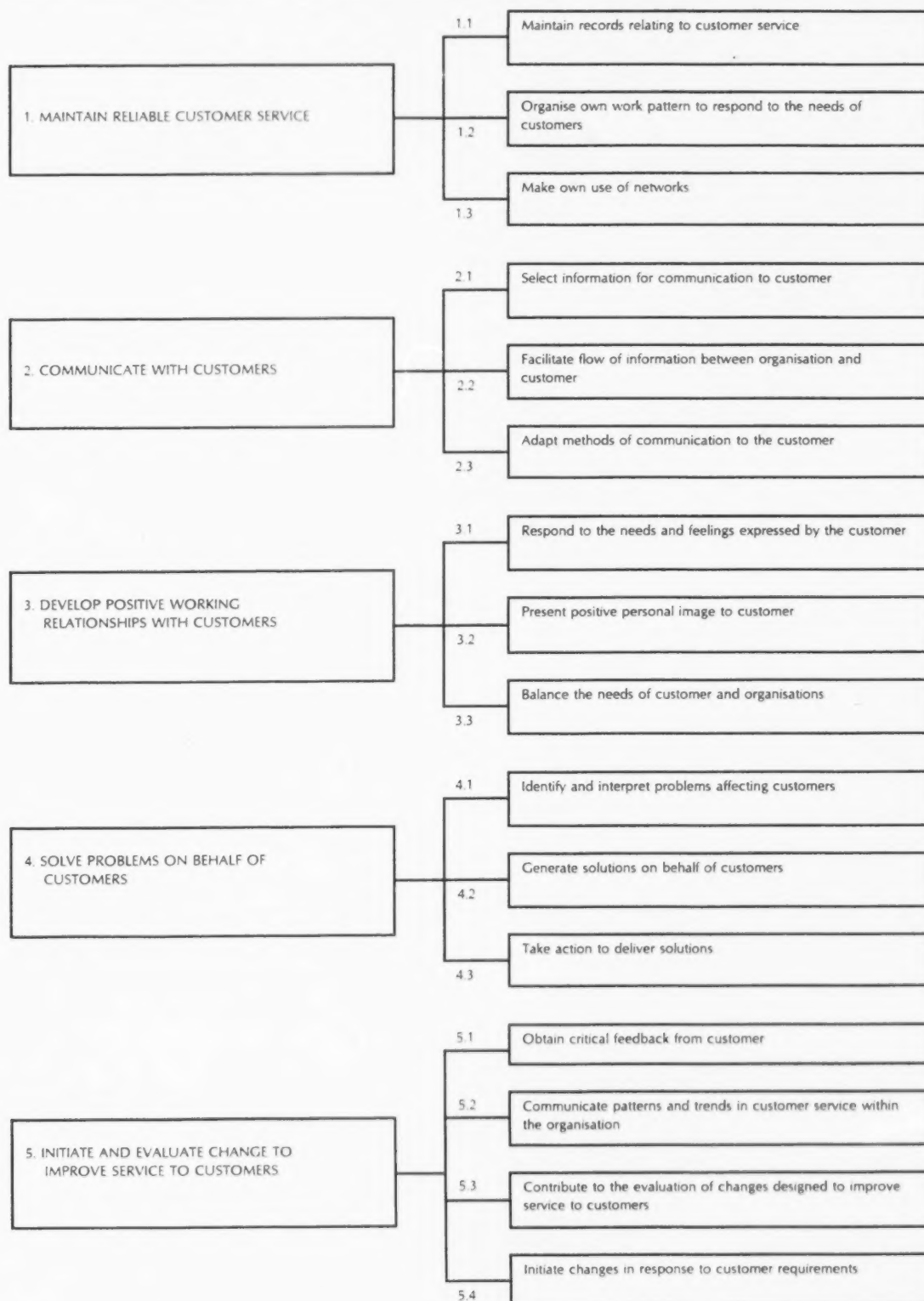
- identification and collation of data
- communication strategies
- interpersonal and communication skills
- storage systems
- monitoring operations, services and systems, and analysing efficiency and quality
- analysis of the effectiveness of selected options
- prioritising information based on customer needs
- the establishment of constructive relationships with customers
- organisation and presentation of information
- the need for security and confidentiality of information

Data relating to:

- relevant products/services
- statutory regulatory requirements
- customers and their requirements
- current processes and outputs of services
- procedures for security and confidentiality of records

Source: Customer Service Lead Body

Fig 3. Customer Service Lead Body: Qualification at Level 3



Source: Customer Service Lead Body

have experience of monitoring staff performance in that job. Sometimes the assessor is the individual candidate's manager.

An **internal verifier** is a person who co-ordinates and monitors the work of his/her assessor colleagues in order to ensure the quality of assessment. The verifier will provide assessors with information about the requirements of the Awarding Body, also provide advice, support and any resources required by assessors, and maintain records of candidates, their registration, assessment and certification. This person is usually from within the training department when there is one.

An employer who meets an Awarding Body's requirements on procedures for assessment of NVQs is given the designation of an **approved assessment centre**. The designation applies to organisations operating on single and multiple sites, and can also be used for consortia.

An **external verifier** is appointed by the Awarding Body to advise and support approved assessment centres, and to ensure that the assessment system is working validly and reliably. The external verifier may visit twice a year to monitor the way assessment procedures are being carried out and to read the assessment records for a sample of NVQ candidates whose performance has been assessed and verified internally. In order to maintain its approved centre status an organisation must continue to satisfy the external verifier that effective and quality assessment is being provided. In practice the external verifier is likely to give advice about how internal systems can be improved.

2.5 Implementing NVQs

Once an employer decides to introduce NVQs, the Awarding Body for the NVQ in question³ will provide guidelines about the procedures to be followed. It is impossible to give definitive guidance on how these operate in all cases⁴. The following account attempts to summarise the main features.

2.5.1 Appointment and training of assessors and internal verifiers

Large employers usually find it most convenient and cost-effective to become an approved assessment centre, which involves appointing and training existing staff as assessors and internal verifiers.

³ In some cases there is a choice of Awarding Body. The *NVQ Monitor*, a publication produced quarterly by NCVQ, lists all current NVQs and their Awarding Bodies.

⁴ In practice Awarding Bodies' practices have varied considerably. In order to encourage consistency, NCVQ has carried out a consultative exercise on how the procedures should be administered, and the result is the document entitled *Awarding Bodies Common Accord*, which is available from NCVQ.

The Awarding Body will have a set of **Assessment Specifications** which provide guidance on how the assessment should be done, and they will usually advise on the qualification assessors should have in order to be entitled to act as assessors⁵. When individuals require training in order to reach that standard it commonly involves initial off the job training lasting two days, and trainee assessors complete their training by carrying out assessment on the job under observation of someone already qualified as an assessor. Such training and assessment is usually available from external training organisations, who can also provide training for the internal verifiers.

2.5.2 Registration and activity leading towards assessment

Registration is the initial process of informing the Awarding Body that an individual wishes to work towards achieving an NVQ. For ease of administration it is usual to register and organise activity leading towards assessment for a group of candidates.

Usual practice is to run an initial workshop for candidates at which a trainer and/or assessor introduces the NVQ and explains what will be required by way of evidence. Subsequently, each candidate is helped to draw up an action plan. The activity required prior to assessment is likely to vary according to the NVQ in question, the way work is organised within the company, and the experience of the individual.

If a candidate has previous experience of all aspects of the NVQ, and is believed to be competent in all those respects, his/her main activity will be to document that experience in a **portfolio** of evidence in relation to the NVQ Units and Elements. In this case the candidate will be gaining the NVQ on the basis of **APL (accreditation of prior learning)**.

Commonly, a candidate has experience and is competent at many aspects of an NVQ, but has no experience of others. In this case those in charge of the NVQ programme may decide to organise opportunities for candidates to learn and practise the missing skills by spending time in departments where they are practised under the guidance in each case of an experienced person. For some aspects a course of formal training may be most appropriate and convenient, particularly if there is a group of candidates to whom it is relevant. Open learning packages are a way of meeting needs specific to individuals.

If candidates have little or no experience of the work in question, training can be provided by any combination of formal courses, use of training workshops, planned work-based learning, or open learning, which is compatible with the resources available. The NVQ system makes no stipulations about the nature of training provided; the adequacy of training is demonstrated if candidates are able to meet the performance criteria of the NVQ when they are assessed.

⁵ Increasingly Awarding Bodies will be requiring those carrying out assessment to achieve the assessment Units D32 and/or D33 which are part of an NVQ in training and development.

Examples of how employers have organised activity for candidates prior to assessment are given in Chapter 3 and information about employees' response in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.5.3 Assessment, verification and certification

Assessors will carry out assessment of individual candidates' performance in accordance with guidelines from the Awarding Body and under the overall direction of the internal verifier. In practice the assessor works closely with the candidate both on the long term timetable for achieving the NVQ and on agreeing the time and place when assessment of a particular Element or Unit will be carried out.

Assessment can be carried out in three different ways:

- by observation of the candidate carrying out a function — for instance, within the Customer Service NVQ, assessment of Unit 2 Communicate with Customers involves observation of face-to-face communication with customers (*nb* Fig. 3)
- by appraisal of written material — for example, within the same Unit, there is a requirement for documentation showing that information has been communicated to customers; letters written by the candidate would be relevant
- by questioning the candidate, either face-to-face between assessor and candidate, or by a written question paper devised by the training department to meet the Awarding Body's assessment criteria for a particular aspect — for example, within the Unit 'Communicate with Customers' the candidate is required to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the principles and methods relating to the need for security and confidentiality.

The assessor signs each Element of the NVQ or Unit for which the candidate is aiming, when the standard of performance for that Element has been achieved to his or her satisfaction.

In addition to maintaining records for the NVQ process as a whole, the internal verifier is responsible for monitoring how assessment is carried out, by observation, through regular meetings with assessors and by sampling of assessment records. He or she countersigns assessment records, and sends completed NVQs and/or Units to the Awarding Body for certification⁶.

Employers' experience of assessment and verification systems is discussed in Chapter 3 and employees' response in Chapters 5 and 6.

⁶ Individuals can keep records of their achieved NVQs and other vocational qualifications in a document entitled the National Record of Vocational Achievement (NROVA). Records are kept nationally by NCVQ of all NVQs which are achieved, as reported to them by the Awarding Bodies.

2.6 Time and money

There is no time limit in principle⁷ on how long a person can take to achieve an NVQ. The time taken in practice is likely to vary with the NVQ, the work situation and the individual candidate. The minimum appears to be three months, but more frequently the time taken is a year. Some employers and candidates also choose to aim only for certain Units. There is further information and discussion of employees' experience of the amount of time involved in Chapters 5 and 6.

Costs of candidate registration and certification, and for becoming an approved assessment centre vary with the Awarding Body and the NVQ. Usually the range is between £50 and £100 per candidate, but the cost can be greater for NVQs at higher Levels. There are also likely to be fees for the training of assessors, and for any training or training materials required for candidates.

In the case of Customer Service, fees per candidate are £8 for initial registration, and £10 for each completed Unit (5 in total). The cost of becoming an approved centre is £27.

The time taken by candidates and assessors for training and assessment is likely to be a greater cost element than the money costs of registration and certification; but this is much harder to calculate.

2.7 Summary

This chapter describes the nature of NVQs and explains how they are used in practice.

The Government-led programme of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) is intended to provide a clear, coherent and comprehensive system of qualifications for all vocational areas, with each award based on an assessment of competence directly relevant to employment needs.

The framework of qualifications and their accreditation is the responsibility of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). Qualifications for particular sectors are based on Occupational Standards developed by industry-led organisations called Lead Bodies. Awarding Bodies design and deliver the qualifications themselves. Employers can, if they wish, use the Occupational Standards on their own without reference to NVQs as a basis for standards setting, appraisal and training.

Assessors have the job of judging an NVQ candidate's performance against specified criteria, and their work is co-ordinated and monitored by **internal verifiers**, who also liaise with the Awarding

⁷ In practice the period for which registration remains valid may be limited, eg to two years; and if a candidate has not achieved the qualification within the period it would be necessary to register again, which would involve additional cost.

Body for the NVQ in question. Large employers who wish to carry out their own assessment may become **approved assessment centres** by meeting an Awarding Body's requirements on procedures for assessment. Assessors are likely to be line managers or supervisors, and the internal assessor often is based in the training department. Awarding Bodies appoint their own **external verifiers** who oversee and monitor the whole process.

The main stages in implementing NVQs for a large employer with its own assessment centre are:

- appointing and training assessors and internal verifiers
- registering candidates, providing guidance and if necessary training in order for them to be able to provide evidence of competence
- carrying out assessment of candidates and internal verification, record keeping, and liaising with the Awarding Body.

In principle there is no limit on the time an individual may take to achieve an NVQ, but in practice it usually takes up to a year. Costs of registration and certification vary with the NVQ, in most cases between £50 and £100 per candidate. Costs taken in time for training and assessment are additional and hard to calculate.

3. Employers' Use of NVQs

This chapter describes the level of NVQ activity among the 15 large employers who participated in the research. It explains their reasons for being involved, and summarises how NVQs were introduced and implemented.

3.1 Level of NVQ activity

The level of activity to date among the 15 employers varied considerably: a minority were using them for large sections of the workforce and the remainder mostly on a pilot or small scale.

Those who had introduced NVQs for all or substantial proportions of groups of key employees included an NHS health trust provider with more than 500 nursing auxiliaries who had already achieved an NVQ, a chemical manufacturing plant where all engineers and all process operatives believed to be capable of achieving an NVQ had done so, and a water company which was introducing NVQs for all its operatives. A county council had about one third of its managers working towards NVQs.

In other cases the number of employees who had achieved an NVQ, or were working towards one, was small relative to the size of the workforce, for instance 200 out of a workforce of 165,000. This was either because NVQs proper had only recently been introduced or because only pilot work had been undertaken so far.

However, these small numbers could belie the level of activity relevant to NVQ development. A national parcel carrier, for instance, had for some years been using a competence based City and Guilds qualification for parcel handlers, designed specifically for them; as soon as the equivalent NVQ became available all those with the old qualification would be invited to be assessed for the NVQ. In the meantime NVQs were being introduced in Business Administration, Management and Training.

While half the employers had some trainees within the Youth Training category and were thus eligible for TEC funding linked to NVQ achievement, in most of those cases NVQs were being used both with trainees and established employees. Only three organisations had concentrated their NVQ activity on trainees to date. But in one of them a few experienced employees were also working towards an NVQ, and in another, development work was under way for a new NVQ for established employees.

The NVQs used covered nine occupational areas including engineering, telecommunications, chemical processing, customer service, health care and hairdressing. Business Administration and/or Management NVQs were used by two thirds of the employers studied.

3.2 Reasons for using NVQs

Employers approached the use of NVQs from rather different starting points. The largest employers had first become involved because they had been represented on the relevant Lead Body as leading players in their respective sectors. Some employers had first become involved because they had youth trainees for whom TEC funding was dependent upon NVQ achievement. Others had become involved for reasons specific to their sector or because NVQs were believed to suit the particular needs of their organisation.

Regardless of the original starting point, a few employers were strongly in favour of NVQs in principle, for instance because they liked the idea of a national standard, because they believed in competence based training, and because they thought NVQs would promote equality of opportunity. Such employers saw them as an appropriate way of helping to achieve consistent standards of performance, while also drawing to the attention of the external world and to employees the fact that this was being done. Offering employees the opportunity to acquire a nationally recognised qualification demonstrated that there was something in it for employees as well as for the employer.

In some cases such convictions accompanied a sectoral need to demonstrate commitment to standards. This was evident for the health sector, where Project 2000 for nurses meant that more demanding tasks were being expected of nursing auxiliaries who hitherto had been unqualified. In the water industry, where public attention tended to be focused on standards, there was also competition between employers to introduce NVQs.

In the case of organisations whose employees traditionally had enjoyed lifetime employment, the introduction of NVQs was seen as an opportunity to provide employees with evidence that their skills would be recognised outside their current employment. This was particularly relevant if the organisation faced change and the possibility that many would be made redundant. Similar concerns about being publicly accountable and raising employee morale influenced a chemicals manufacturer, despite reservations about the suitability of the NVQs in question.

Most employers had undertaken NVQ activity so far in a tentative fashion. They saw NVQs potentially as a means of raising standards and employee morale, but wished to evaluate results and see what other large employers would do before making decisions about long term policy. In such cases uncertainty about an organisation's future development worked against commitment to NVQs, making

employers hesitant to make policy decisions with large-scale organisational and resource implications.

3.3 Implementing NVQs

3.3.1 Awareness raising

Most employers had explained what NVQs were and how they were to be used only to those groups of employees who were to be directly involved as assessors and candidates.

The exceptions were the few employers who had decided on a long term commitment to NVQs at the point when they were first introduced. They saw it as essential to inform managers at an early stage in order that there should be support for individuals undertaking NVQs throughout the organisation.

3.3.2 Arrangements for managing the NVQ process

Responsibility for managing the NVQ process among employees generally lay with training departments, and this was done on a centralised or decentralised basis in accordance with normal arrangements for organising training. In two cases special units had been set up to provide NVQ related training and assessment, but in most cases the scale of NVQ activity was too small to make radical changes necessary.

Most training units set up and maintained the administrative arrangements necessary for NVQ candidates to compile evidence, for training to be provided if required, and for assessment to be carried out. Training staff set up and maintained administrative arrangements with Awarding Bodies (and if pilots were involved, with the Lead Body too). They decided who should be given the opportunity to register for an NVQ, found suitable people to carry out the assessment process, and organised training for assessors. Training staff were likely to train as assessors themselves, and often took the role of internal verifier.

Training staff had also to arrange and organise any external facilities or support which were needed. Some very large organisations had access to their own corporate college, which could provide assessor training and help manage deployment of assessors.

Two organisations had training workshops for Youth or Employment Trainees. In these cases training staff provided the training, assessment and internal verification.

3.3.3 Use of external organisations for training and assessment

External organisations were used for most NVQ related training and assessment by only a minority of employers, for example:

- A national freight carrier piloting management SVQs in its Scottish region had no internal trained assessors or experience of

using SVQs at the point when the pilot started. So they used a local college to help candidates collect and present their evidence and to carry out assessment.

- A building society whose managers had previously been sponsored on a course leading to the CMS (Certificate in Management Studies), was negotiating for the course to be amended so that it would also enable candidates to achieve the Management NVQ.
- The water company used an external training organisation both for training and assessment of its operatives, because it wished all employees to achieve the NVQ fairly quickly, and it was more cost effective to use a specialist organisation with all the equipment required, than to train internal assessors for activity over a relatively short period.
- The chemical manufacturer found the best way to cover the knowledge requirements for chemical processing was to buy in an open learning package.

Most employers used external organisations much less. They might send candidates to a short external course, eg on use of spreadsheets, for a particular aspect of an NVQ, or use an external organisation for training of assessors, but otherwise relied on activity in house.

3.3.4 Internal assessors: their roles and training

Some employers trained existing instructors as assessors, for instance driving instructors or instructors of engineering apprentices based in a training workshop. But the majority, concerned with areas of work where formal training had not previously been provided, asked line managers and supervisors to volunteer for the role of assessor. Where it was practicable for such people to carry out assessment of their own staff this tended to be seen as an advantage: it would emphasise the line manager's responsibility for developing and maintaining high standards of performance among their staff, and increase opportunities for them to identify training needs and provide coaching and support.

In some cases fewer assessors had been trained and these then travelled as peripatetic assessors within their local area to carry out assessment for a larger number of candidates. Other employers operating on a smaller scale were using assessors to assess both their own staff and those of other managers in the same department.

Formal training for assessors, often provided by an external organisation, was provided by most employers. Some of them then used those who had been trained to cascade to others (though occasionally an Awarding Body insisted that all assessors received direct training of a particular kind). The formal part might involve a two day workshop about the nature of NVQs, principles of assessment, guidance on use of paperwork, and role plays of carrying out assessment. Completion of training would involve the trainee assessor carrying out assessment of some candidates' work, and being observed and assessed as competent.

3.3.5 Compiling evidence, training and assessment

Accreditation of prior learning (APL) is based on evidence of past achievement. A few employers set up arrangements based on this approach for candidates who were expected already to be up to standard, either through an external organisation or through the efforts of in-house assessors. More frequently use was made of this method just for those areas of work in which candidates were thoroughly experienced, and the term APL was not always used.

Gaps in a candidate's experience were in many cases made good by providing 'work placements', ie the candidate spent time observing and learning those functions in another section or department, usually working alongside and under the direction of an experienced person. Other less common options were to carry out projects usually developed by the training department, to use open learning, or to attend a short course. The postal services employer, which was using the customer service NVQ, arranged for candidates to work together on the compiling of evidence in self-help groups, to which candidates would sometimes invite the assessor.

The assessor would carry out assessment by observation of the candidate doing the job, by examining written evidence, and by asking questions. The exact combination of these different approaches depended mainly on the nature of the work. Line managers responsible for assessing telecommunications engineers, for instance, would spend time with candidates observing them perform some parts of the job, and questioning them about 'what they would do if...' in relation to the current job specification. Sometimes it was necessary to set up simulations of work activities or take the candidate to another site where the work in question was being done. By comparison, relatively little if any of a manager's activity would be directly observed. Assessment would be carried out on the basis of written evidence supplemented by questions about the rationale for different procedures and principles involved.

3.3.6 Training aspects of assessor role

While the function was not necessarily made explicit, many workplace assessors were, by acting as facilitators, in practice contributing to candidates' training. For instance, when assessors discussed with a candidate how evidence might be presented, and how to build a portfolio of evidence, the discussion was likely to refer to the relationships between different aspects of the job itself and the organisation of work. Discussion about whether a candidate was ready to be assessed on particular aspects, again would involve reference to how functions should be carried out. Should a candidate not reach the required standard for a particular Element, feedback from the assessor would give information and advice about what needed to be done to improve performance.

3.4 Summary

In most cases experience of NVQs was on a small scale, even though a few employers had used NVQs for a large proportion of a particular occupational group.

Only a few employers had disseminated information about NVQs widely, and on the whole only employees who had been involved in NVQ activity as assessors or candidates were likely to know about them.

Organisation of training related to NVQs and their assessment was done mainly in-house, though use of external organisations was important in a few cases. Use of APL on its own was rare. Training related to NVQs relied mainly on the use of structured work placements within the organisation, though projects, open learning, and short courses for particular aspects were also used. Assessment, carried out usually by line managers or supervisors, was based on observation, written evidence and questioning, the balance of these methods depending mainly on the nature of the work done. Assessors also had a role in training which, however, was not usually made explicit.

4. Factors Influencing Employers' Future Intentions

While some employers were already using NVQs on a significant scale or planning to do so as soon as a particular NVQ became available, others were uncertain about the way forward. Factors which would help decide whether or not to invest in NVQs on a large scale included the following:

- whether the costs could be justified in terms of benefits
- how suitable NVQs were for the job and workforce
- whether NVQs would achieve a high public profile
- employees' response.

Chapters 5 and 6 report on findings about employees' and trainees' attitudes towards NVQs. Clearly knowledge of those attitudes would be a factor in employers' decisions about future NVQ involvement.

This chapter describes employers' attitudes on the remaining factors.

4.1 Benefits and costs

4.1.1 Benefits

HRD managers who were key decision makers on future use of NVQs were in general aware of important potential benefits. In addition to the expectation that use of NVQs could help raise standards of performance and would contribute to employee morale, the idea of training all line managers as NVQ assessors had great appeal. It would give official and public confirmation to the coaching and supervisory role which employers were keen for their line managers to adopt, a benefit described by one company training manager as 'worth its weight in gold'. The Occupational Standards on which NVQs are based were in many cases seen as providing a core for an overall management strategy covering recruitment, selection, appraisal and performance management, and line managers would clearly have a key role in all such functions. NVQs would fit into the change of culture required for such an approach to work because they would make necessary one to one meetings between a line manager and his/her staff.

Another crucial characteristic of NVQs was that they 'happen in the workplace'. In general there was considerable support for the principle of competence based training, and a belief that it was likely to be more effective than courses run away from the job. A few

employers had used or tried to use further education colleges for aspects of NVQ provision, and in general had found the arrangement unsatisfactory. Such experiences confirmed the view that a key benefit of NVQs was that they were employment based and should remain that way.

The fact that NVQs could be developed for relatively specialised areas of work and for employees who previously had no opportunity to acquire qualifications was also seen as a major benefit. An aero-engineering company, for instance, which had already introduced NVQs for its engineering trainees, saw NVQs as being of particular advantage for employees in investment casting production. So it had been heavily involved in development work with the Lead Body to develop an NVQ for that group, and was awaiting its accreditation before piloting it.

4.1.2 Costs

While money costs for registration and certification could be extremely high on paper if NVQs were introduced for a whole workforce, they were not in general perceived as high in the context of annual training budgets.

Managers were more concerned about the time involved for candidates and assessors in the whole NVQ process. In addition to the time taken for assessment itself, in large organisations there were also time and money costs for travel of assessors to meet candidates. Employers who had two or more years' experience of NVQs or other competence based training had also become aware that the difficulty of matching assessors to candidates at the right moment sometimes meant that trained assessors were not used for long periods and got out of practice. So time for re-training would have to be added to the original assessment training time.

Some managers were aware that much of assessors' work was being done in their own time, and while they were away from the workplace to attend a course on assessment, cover was not always provided. Some were satisfied that this arrangement could work, but others felt the situation was not viable for the longer term and thought that extra resources were needed.

Some employers had gained advantages from their size — for instance being able to negotiate a lower price with the awarding body for verification because of the large numbers involved. The health care trust which had set up a special training unit in order to introduce NVQs was using its trainers to provide NVQ related training for local small employers, and thus attracting some income.

Employers whose NVQ activity was primarily with trainees were concerned that the level of TEC subsidy was gradually falling away. A health trust commissioner which provided training for adults could not continue in that capacity unless funds covered their costs. Other employers, for instance the hairdressing company, said they would consider withdrawing from NVQs and issuing their own certificate

based on similar standards if the amount and conditions for funding further deteriorated.

4.1.3 Comparing costs with benefits

While employers were very aware of the nature both of costs and benefits in general, deciding on whether the costs could be justified was not easy to do. While they knew the time involved in NVQs must be considerable, they were unable to quantify it. One manager said that he felt himself able to demonstrate to his board the value of NVQs in terms of benefits from training, viz. by reference to unit costs, quality, accident prevention, motivation and flexibility. Others were less confident. Some training managers at the operational end said they thought that senior executives underestimated the time involved both in NVQs and in the alternative of using in-house standards for appraisal.

One national employer had an evaluation programme under way in order to measure the value added of customer service NVQs by reference to customer satisfaction surveys. The outcome of this exercise would help decide future policy. Another major employer said that future policy would depend upon value added from NVQs being demonstrated, but it was unclear when or how the necessary evaluation would be carried out.

Thus while the principle of comparing costs and benefits was high on the agenda, it seemed unlikely that the outcome would in most cases actually be decided by that means¹.

4.2 Suitability of NVQs for the job and workforce

Some employers were dissatisfied with particular NVQs for such reasons as the following:

- The NVQ was considered a poor match to the job
- The NVQ did not sufficiently cover such aspects as the individual's overall attitude, team work and ability to project the company image
- Requirements on the underpinning knowledge were outdated
- There were concerns about the complexity and time consumed by building evidence portfolios.

There were also complaints in general about jargon.

Employers who were most committed to the NVQ concept were prepared to make the best of any difficulties, for instance, by re-writing NVQ performance criteria in company language. Reservations about one NVQ did not always put employers off the idea of using

¹ Information and guidelines relevant to the measurement of costs and benefits are dealt with in Crowley-Bainton, T and White, M (1993) *Costs and Benefits of National Vocational Qualifications to Employers*, Policy Studies Institute.

others. For instance a building society, whose experience to date had been mainly with the Business Administration NVQ for headquarters clerical and secretarial staff, was unsure about the continuing resource implications for that group of employees; but it was currently piloting and expecting to extend to all regions, the NVQ in Building Society Services.

Allowance was also made for the fact that the concept of NVQs, the language and the method were all new; so some of the problems would be overcome with experience.

However, the question of an NVQ's suitability was crucial when the content was thought to be unsuitable for the main workforce. While NVQs in customer service, management, and business administration were being used on a small scale by two major national employers, the suitability of NVQs relevant to their main grade of operational staff would determine whether or not they became NVQ employers. In one case there was dissatisfaction with the way development was going of the NVQ most appropriate to them, one in mail operations. Only four optional Units would be directly relevant and it was not clear whether they would be allowed to contextualise other Units into their own language.

In another case, a pilot of the NVQ for telecommunications engineering at Level 2 was reported by line managers to have been insufficiently demanding for established employees. This may have been because the qualification at Level 2 was too low: the organisation was waiting to see how satisfactory a new Level 3 qualification would be for engineering and technical grades, before making a policy decision.

4.3 Public profile

There was a general feeling among employers that if NVQs became established to the point where most large employers were using them, and where they were known to the general public, they as individual employers would wish to follow the general trend.

The very largest were aware that their own decisions on NVQs would help influence the trend one way or the other. Others (even leading employers in their sector) were also sensitive to how NVQs were perceived within it. Thus the leading hairdressing salon, which had various reservations about NVQs including their costs, and might seriously consider withdrawing, said that the one thing which would hold them back would be if NVQs came to be recognised as a requirement for a 'quality organisation'.

Clearly the main factor bearing on how well NVQs are known is the level of take-up. Recent research undertaken by IMS for the Employment Department² bears on this issue. A national survey of 1,506 employers found that while use of NVQs was low for employers in general, 44 per cent of employers with 500 plus

² *Op. cit.*

1,506 employers found that while use of NVQs was low for employers in general, 44 per cent of employers with 500 plus employees were using them and a further 12 per cent had plans to do so. The research also showed that three-quarters of employers using NVQs had 35 or fewer employees and trainees involved. However, 13 per cent of those using NVQs had 500 or more employees taking NVQs, so a minority of employers are already making a substantial commitment.

4.4 Summary

Factors influencing employers who were unsure about whether to commit themselves to use of NVQs in the future were as follows:

- Whether the costs could be justified in terms of benefits

Employers were clear about a number of important potential benefits, and were also usually aware of the major cost associated with delivery of NVQs, *ie* the time of candidates and assessors. For the most cases, however, they had no way of assessing the value added of NVQs, so it seemed likely that the final decision would be made on other criteria.

- How suitable NVQs were for the job and workforce

While many employers had reservations about various aspects of NVQs and the content of certain NVQs, they were inclined to live with these if other factors seemed right. However, employers were very reluctant to commit themselves to NVQs if the one most relevant to their main workforce was wrong in terms of content or level.

- Whether NVQs would achieve a high public profile

This was an important consideration for many employers, and was to a large extent dependent on the level of NVQ take-up overall. Relevant to this is a finding from recent national research, which shows that take-up is low on average among all employers, but that more than half of large employers are using NVQs or plan to use them.

- Employees' response

A final key aspect is the response of employees to the introduction of NVQs. This is discussed in the next two chapters.

5. NVQ Candidates' Experience and Attitudes

This chapter summarises the findings from a survey of employees and trainees who had experience of NVQs. It describes the age and background of respondents, their experience of training and assessment related to NVQs, and their attitudes towards NVQs.

The survey questionnaire was distributed to employees and trainees by training managers within the 15 organisations contributing to the research. Respondents returned the questionnaire direct to IMS. Details of the survey and response rate are provided in Appendix 1, which also contains some additional tables.

5.1 Respondents' age, experience and qualifications

There were 272 respondents in total of whom 57 per cent were employees, 15 per cent trainees with Youth Trainee status and 28 per cent with Employment Trainee status.

Employees were fairly evenly spread across the age range, the majority being between 26 and 50 years, and 10 per cent being 51 or older. Just over half had previous experience of the same kind of work with another employer. Most were well established with their current employer. Three quarters had been doing their present job for two years or more, the majority for between 2 and 5 years. Thus employees were for the most part very experienced in their work.

The majority of trainees were under 20. Most of the Employment Trainees over that age had previous experience of the work for which they were training.

One third of respondents already had a vocational qualification, the majority from BTEC or City and Guilds. The most commonly used NVQs within the sample were in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, followed by NVQs in Health Care and Nursing, and in Hairdressing. Most NVQs were used only within one or two employers, but candidates in Management and Business Administration were found across ten different employers. Details of the numbers using traditional vocational qualifications and different NVQs are shown in Appendix 1.

Fifty five per cent of respondents were male and 45 per cent female, and 93 per cent who answered the question on ethnic origin were white.

Where differences in response to questions about NVQs were likely to be of interest, those of employees and trainees, male and female respondents, and those aged under and those over 25 were compared. The few differences which were statistically significant (at least at the five per cent level) are reported where relevant in the remainder of the chapter.

5.2 Experience of working towards an NVQ

5.2.1 Reasons for involvement

The great majority of respondents were aware that their training and assessment programme was related to an NVQ. More than two thirds had heard about it from their employer, and almost one third had heard about NVQs before they had personally become involved. Only nine per cent were unaware.

Table 5.1 shows the reasons given by the respondents for taking part in an NVQ related programme. The most common reason they gave was that they liked the idea of getting a nationally recognised qualification (57 per cent), and the next that they welcomed the opportunity for training (43 per cent). Job security or career reasons were also widely endorsed, though only 16 per cent said that they expected the NVQ to help them keep their job.

Table 5.1 Reasons for involvement in an NVQ related programme

Reason	N	%
Liked the idea of getting a nationally recognised qualification	152	57
Glad of opportunity to be trained	116	43
Thought it would improve opportunities for promotion	86	32
Condition of being taken on by the organisation	75	28
Requirement for those doing the job	69	26
Thought it would improve chances of getting a job	55	21
Thought it would help to keep job	43	16
Other	20	7

N = 268

Source: IMS Survey 1993

The 'other' category included a wish for personal achievement or for recognition by the company, and the fact that the NVQ was a practical, not an academic qualification, showing achievement at work.

5.2.2 Expectations and achievements

One fifth of respondents were unsure whether they were aiming for a full NVQ or only for a certain Unit. Of the remainder 88 per cent said they were aiming for full NVQs, with the other 12 per cent aiming for certain Units only.

Respondents had either achieved their aim by the time they completed the questionnaire (53 per cent), or were expecting to complete the NVQ or part of it as originally planned (41 per cent). Just 13 respondents (six per cent) thought they would not or might not complete their original aim. The reason given by half of these was that they lacked the time or had too heavy a workload, with the remainder giving a variety of reasons.

5.2.3 APL and NVQ related training

Respondents were asked whether they had been given credit for prior experience. More than one third answered 'no' to this question and a further third were unsure, suggesting that the concept of APL was not widely understood. Sixteen per cent said they had received credit through an APL programme, and 14 per cent that credit had been given informally. These replies are consistent with interview findings that most employers had not used the term 'APL' with candidates.

Almost all respondents had received some form of training in support of the NVQ. The most common experience was attendance at training sessions run by the organisation's training staff or training on the job by a manager or supervisor. Only one fifth of respondents had attended a course run externally and 12 per cent used distance or open learning materials.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the training they had received. Of those who answered this question, 39 per cent had found it very satisfactory and 45 per cent fairly satisfactory. Only six per cent rated it as unsatisfactory.

The reasons given by the few respondents who expressed dissatisfaction were mainly that the training was not relevant, there was not enough training given or tutors' delivery was poor.

5.2.4 Assessment

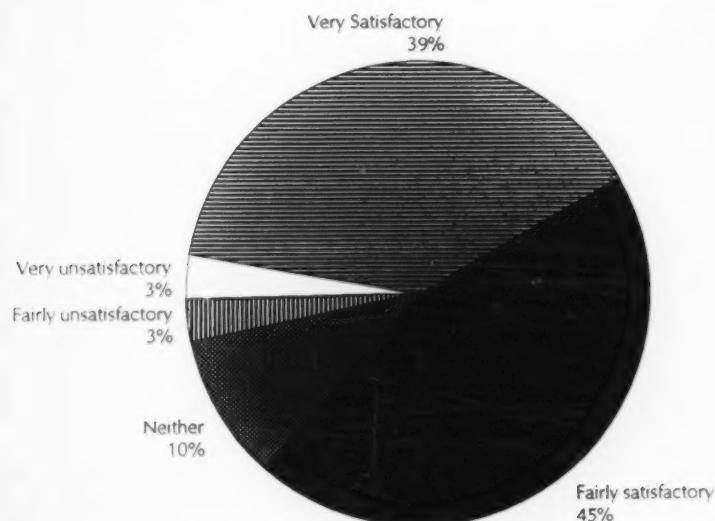
Seventy one per cent of respondents reported that they had been assessed for all or some of the Units they were aiming for. Eighteen per cent had not been assessed and 11 per cent did not know. Among those who had been assessed 15 per cent had had to repeat their assessment.

The majority of respondents had been assessed by someone from within the organisation: a manager, or supervisor or member of training staff. More than one person had contributed to assessment for some people, and most had been assessed in normal working or training conditions. Only 24 per cent had been assessed by an external assessor and in some of these cases away from their normal place of work.

When asked to say how satisfactory was the assessment they had received, 49 per cent said they were very satisfied and 40 per cent fairly satisfied. Those who had had to repeat an assessment were less likely than others to say they were highly satisfied. The number saying they were dissatisfied was too small (only four per cent of the whole sample) to make a valid comparison between those who had had to repeat and others who did not. So while having to repeat an assessment reduced the level of satisfaction with assessment, there is no evidence that it made assessment unacceptable.

Among the small group who were dissatisfied, the reasons given were that assessment was not thorough enough or that there were delays in being assessed.

Figure 5.1 Level of satisfaction with NVQ related training



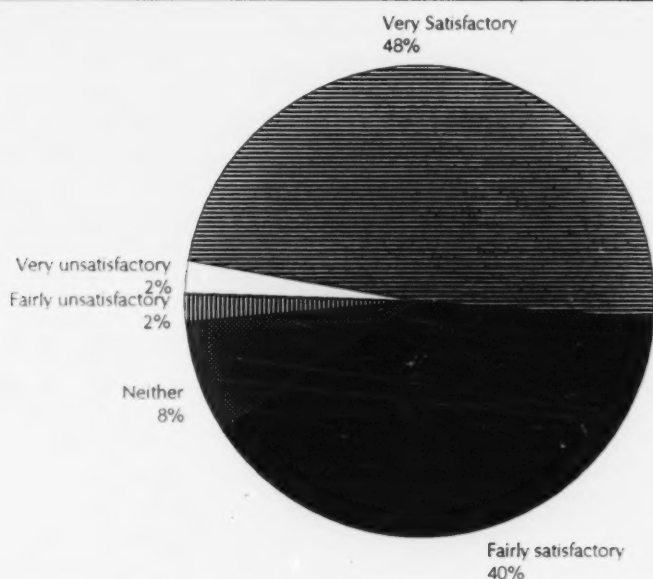
Source: IMS Survey 1993

5.2.5 Time, support and progress

All respondents were asked whether they agreed, on a five point scale, with a series of statements about the experience of working towards an NVQ, the time involved, level of support received, and progress. Table 5.2 shows the level of support for each statement.

Opinion was fairly evenly divided on most of these questions, and so we compared various groups of respondents to see if opinion differed by status or type of NVQ. Between employees and trainees there was just one difference: trainees were more likely than employees to agree that there were no differences finding the time needed. This is to be expected given that employees have to fit in at least some of their NVQ activity into normal working time, whereas trainees do not.

Figure 5.2 Level of satisfaction with assessment



Source: IMS Survey 1993

We also compared the responses of Management NVQ candidates with the remainder of the sample and Business Administration candidates with the remainder (both NVQs being used across a range of employers). Those working towards Management NVQs were more likely than other respondents to agree with the statement that it was difficult to know how to present evidence required by NVQs. Probably the reason for this lies in the nature of the performance criteria and evidence requirements for Management NVQs, which in many cases are abstract and cannot be routinely observed. There was no difference between Business administration candidates and others.

Table 5.2 Responses on time, support and progress

Statement	N	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
There have been delays when I was ready to be assessed	255	29	33	38
There have been no problems finding the time needed to meet the NVQ requirements	264	41	20	39
My manager/supervisor does/did not attach much importance to my progress on the NVQ	265	27	25	48
I have found it difficult knowing how to present the evidence required by the NVQ	265	35	27	37
It is/was easier to make progress on the NVQ than I expected	264	48	34	18

Source: IMS Survey 1993

There was a higher level of consensus on the last question, with almost half of respondents saying that it was easier to make progress on the NVQ than initially expected, and fewer than 20 per cent disagreeing. This is congruent with the view expressed by employers (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2) that some of the initial difficulties of NVQs arise from their newness.

5.3 Attitudes towards NVQs

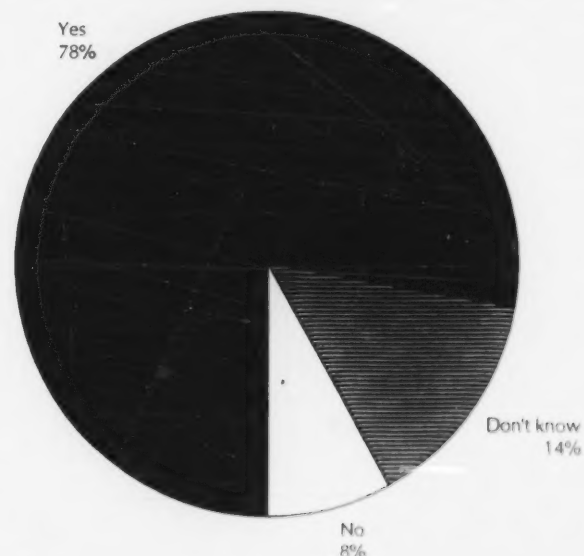
As a check on overall attitude towards NVQs, respondents were asked whether they would recommend the NVQ they were following to other people doing the same job. A large majority (78 per cent) said 'yes', 14 per cent replied 'don't know' and eight per cent said 'no' (Fig. 5.3).

Respondents who volunteered their reasons for recommending NVQs mentioned mainly advantages to do with improved performance in the job, and the fact that their competence was recognised.

Among the minority who would not recommend or were not sure, the most common objection was that NVQs were not relevant to the job or that nothing new was learned. Others said there was too much paperwork or it was too time-consuming.

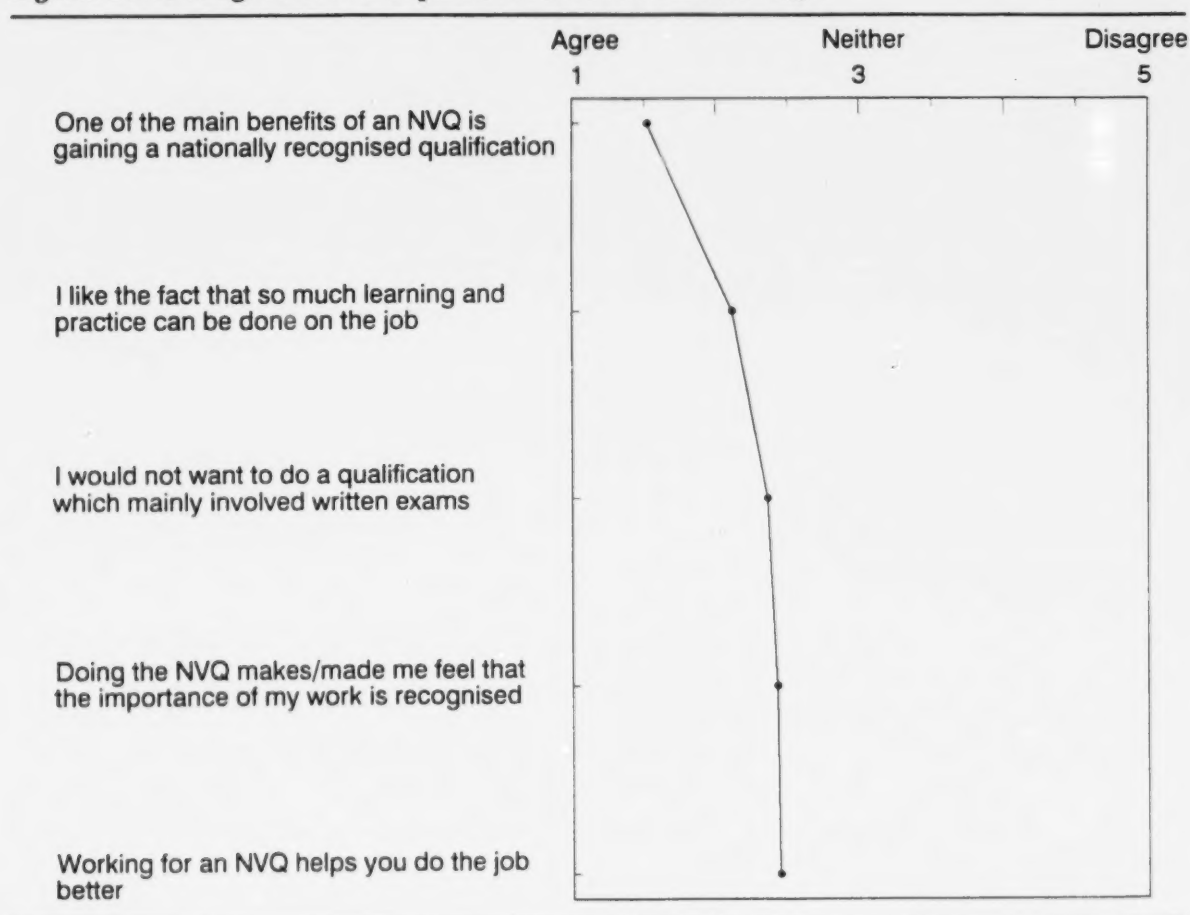
Respondents were also asked to say whether they agreed with a number of attitude statements stressing the advantages claimed for NVQs: Fig. 5.4.

Fig. 5.3 Proportion willing to recommend NVQs



Source: IMS Survey 1993

Fig. 5.4 Level of agreement with positive statements about NVQs



Source: IMS Survey 1993

Here there was a majority in favour of all statements. It is evident that gaining a qualification was the main recommendation for most respondents. Over half agreed that working for an NVQ helps do the job better. (See Table 9 in Appendix 1 for full details.)

Respondents also liked the fact that the learning involved is done in the workplace and does not involve a written examination. Women were even more likely than men to agree to both statements. This was the only difference between men and women found throughout the survey.

Respondents were also asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with statements encapsulating some of the main criticisms which have been made of NVQs (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Responses to criticisms of NVQs

Statement	N	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
The language of the NVQ is confusing	268	44	26	29
Some parts of the NVQ are never done by a person in my job	259	38	34	28
The NVQ leaves out some important parts of my job	264	22	39	40
Working towards the NVQ involves a lot of unnecessary paperwork	267	36	28	37

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Here there was a fairly high degree of support for some criticisms, but less for others. The criticism which gained most support was that the language of NVQs was confusing. On relevance, more were concerned that the NVQ was too broad for the actual job than that it was too narrow.

In addition, respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the statement that there is no point in working for a qualification unless it leads to promotion or higher pay. Thirty seven per cent agreed with this statement, though slightly more (42 per cent) disagreed.

5.4 Differences between those recommending NVQs and others

In general, then the majority of respondents were in favour of NVQs, and were more likely to endorse the advantages that are claimed for them than to be critical. However, 22 per cent of respondents would not positively recommend NVQs to others. What were the differences in attitude or experience between this group and the 78 per cent who would recommend NVQs to others?

5.4.1 Differences in views between those recommending NVQs and the remainder

The views of those who would recommend NVQs were compared with the remainder. Differences were found in responses to certain attitude statements as follows. Those who **would** positively recommend NVQs were **more likely** to agree with:

'There have been no problems finding the time needed to meet the NVQ requirements'

'I like the fact that so much learning and practice can be done on the job'

Those **not** recommending NVQs were **more likely** to agree with the following statements:

'Working towards the NVQ involves a lot of unnecessary paperwork'

'I have found it difficult knowing how to present the evidence required by the NVQ'

Some of these differences in attitude are associated with other factors already reported: trainees being more likely than employees to agree there were no problems finding the time needed, women being more likely than men to like the fact that so much learning and practice can be done on the job for NVQs, and Management NVQ candidates being more likely than others to find it difficult to know how to present evidence.

Those not recommending NVQs were also more likely to agree that there was no point in working for a qualification unless it led to promotion or higher pay. There is no way of telling the extent to which this was a pre-existing attitude which helps explain how individuals responded to an NVQ, or whether it was a response to a bad experience. Agreement with the statement was not associated with trainee or employee status, type of NVQ, age or gender.

5.4.2 Lack of understanding

Apart from the differences in attitude just described, what appears to distinguish those who would not recommend NVQs from others is their lack of understanding of NVQs.

This group of 59 respondents (22 per cent of all respondents) included more 'don't knows' (14 per cent) than those who definitely would not recommend (six per cent). Forty seven out of the 59 gave reasons for their reply, but the largest single reply was that the respondent did not understand enough to be able to comment.

Employees and trainees, different age groups, and groups working towards different NVQs, were compared for their willingness to recommend NVQs. In only one case was there a difference: the proportion recommending NVQs was lower overall among trainees than among employees. However, this was mainly the effect of the views of trainees from one company¹, where 36 per cent of the group did not recommend NVQs to others, most of them being 'don't knows'. So again ignorance rather than trainee status appears to be the relevant factor.

5.5 Summary

Employee NVQ candidates were evenly spread across the age range and were for the most part very experienced in their occupational area.

¹ See Chapter 6, 6.3.1 for further information about this group.

The most popular reason for working towards an NVQ was to get a nationally recognised qualification. Job security and career related motives were also relevant for many.

The majority had achieved or expected to achieve the NVQ or Units they were aiming for. More than two-thirds had been assessed for all or some of the Units for which they were aiming, and assessment had been carried out mainly in-house. Almost all respondents had received some form of training in support of the NVQ, most of it being provided in-house. The great majority of candidates found both training and assessment satisfactory, but the concept of APL did not appear to be generally understood.

Overall there was considerable support for NVQs, with a large majority saying they would recommend them to other people doing the same job, and a high level of agreement with the statements stressing the advantages of NVQs. The statement to get the highest level of support was that one of the main benefits of an NVQ was that it was a nationally recognised qualification. The criticism gaining the most support was that the language of NVQs was confusing.

While a majority of all respondents liked the fact that learning and practice for an NVQ can be done on the job, and agreed that they would not want to do a qualification which mainly involved written examinations, women were even more likely than men to agree with those statements.

About one third of respondents reported problems with time, support and producing evidence for NVQs, but almost half agreed that it was easier to make progress than expected. Trainees, however, were less likely to find time a problem than employees, and managers were more likely than others to find it difficult to know how to present the evidence required for their NVQ, probably because of the nature of the performance criteria and evidence in question.

The minority who would not positively recommend use of NVQs were more likely than others to have had problems finding the time required and presenting the evidence, and more likely to think NVQs involved a lot of unnecessary paperwork. But this group also appeared to be less informed and have less understanding of NVQs than the remainder.

6. Benefits and Drawbacks: Views of Candidates and Assessors

This chapter reports the findings from interviews in the six case study organisations with candidates, assessors, and those responsible for organising assessment on a day to day basis. It provides additional information about how the benefits of NVQs were perceived and also what the problems were, both in principle and in the way in which NVQs were implemented.

Forty people altogether contributed to discussions either on a one-to-one or group basis. Twenty six of these were candidates who also had experience as assessors of whom a few who were working for Management or Training NVQs. Individuals who had responsibility for organising assessment for the most part were assessors themselves.

6.1 Benefits

6.1.1. Candidates' perceptions

During the interviews NVQ candidates volunteered many reasons why NVQs were beneficial. NVQs were seen as more relevant than academic qualifications because they were practical and related to the workplace and gave recognition for what the individual had achieved at work. They were also believed to raise standards because candidates had to reflect on the NVQ requirements in relation to the job, to monitor standards, and to discuss such matters with other candidates and with assessors.

For example:

'Doing the NVQ gives an insight into the work done by various other departments, which helps develop a greater understanding of how the organisation works...'

'It helps you understand the individual needs of the patient...'

'I now understand what I am working with and with this knowledge I am more confident...'

New things learned included improvements in spelling and punctuation, in the course of preparing a portfolio for presentation, using a new database package, and becoming more aware of health and safety requirements. One candidate spoke of becoming more aware of what the job involved for his own line manager in terms of planning and maintaining standards.

Another candidate said he and his colleagues joked about the idea of 'anti-portfolios' of evidence when they observed things being done badly. Candidates in another organisation who had worked as a group on the Management NVQ Level 4 found there had been benefits in sharing experience and comparing notes about how they carried out particular aspects of the job.

While health care candidates had attended a course to cover the underpinning knowledge and understanding of their NVQ, the gains in understanding and skills made by most candidates in other organisations had very often occurred mainly in the course of preparation for or as part of the assessment process rather than through formal training.

Another benefit for many candidates was the opportunity to have their work and achievements recognised, which was both a cause for personal satisfaction and also possibly a means of being able to impress other employers:

'You have great satisfaction when Units are credited knowing you are able to demonstrate in a professional manner the correct way to do things...'

'It is recognition for the work I do in a practical sense. It could be beneficial for future employers knowing exactly the standard of work for a particular NVQ...'

The value of having a qualification which would be recognised by other employers was particularly appreciated in companies involved in re-organisation and downsizing.

6.1.2. Assessors' perceptions

Line managers and supervisors who had acted as assessors commented that the requirements of the NVQ led to more systematic coverage of performance than what had been offered under previous training arrangements or by traditional qualifications. They believed that use of the NVQ could identify where a direct entrant had weaknesses in performance. In an organisation where formal training was being cut back, a line manager thought action needed to be taken at workplace level instead and that the NVQ was appropriate for that purpose.

Candidates' beliefs that they had gained greater understanding of what their job involved were confirmed by comments from assessors: hospital ward sisters and managers were reported as commenting on staff's greater willingness to think for themselves and on greater job satisfaction and raised morale. Use of NVQs was thought to have raised standards, for instance through helping focus attention on staff/patient interaction.

Assessors in healthcare and office environments said that use of the NVQ contributed to team-building, both between candidate and assessor and more widely. Where NVQ coverage had involved candidates working for periods in departments other than their own, team building was said to have improved because of a greater

appreciation of pressures in those departments. For instance, a secretary who had had experience on the switchboard would no longer expect the switchboard operator to look up telephone numbers.

In general it was thought that use of NVQs improved confidence and raised morale. For individuals with no previous qualifications working in jobs where traditionally there had been little training or recognition of skills, the gaining of a qualification was of enormous significance: one healthcare assistant had broken down and cried when she received her certificate.

Assessors also thought there were benefits for themselves in developing the skills of assessment and raising the quality of interaction between themselves and candidates. For instance, a line manager responsible for engineers working in the field commented that carrying out assessment had made him get out of the office more, and reconsider the demands he was making of his people. Using the NVQ gave him a greater sense of purpose when making site visits. Another assessor in the same company said that use of the NVQ had made him and other assessors realise there were gaps in their existing system for dealing with problems on site, and showed where there was scope for more problem-solving and checking.

6.2 Problems arising from the nature of NVQs

While candidates and assessors were in general enthusiastic about NVQs they also identified shortcomings.

6.2.1 Jargon and paperwork

Some candidates reported having been very intimidated when they first saw the NVQ written requirements, and had kept going only because they were used to persevering against difficulties. Many said they disliked the jargon, and one remarked, 'the language undermines the learning value'. One training manager responsible for assessment had gone so far as to re-write the performance criteria in more 'common-sense' language.

Managers whose own work was office based, and who had produced portfolios of written evidence for the Management NVQ Level 4, felt that the process of portfolio building for Management NVQ Level 3 would be very difficult for line managers supervising operational work because their jobs normally involved very little paperwork.

6.2.2 Relevance to jobs and individuals

Most candidates and assessors had no criticism of the relevance of the NVQ they were using either to the job as a whole or for themselves in particular. But some people felt an NVQ was unsuitable for people very experienced in the work and more appropriate for newcomers.

Those who were concerned about the fact that the NVQ was broader than the job itself on the whole, were not opposed in principle to the fact that candidates might have to learn and practise skills they did

not usually use. But it could pose difficulties in practice, especially if certain parts of the work in question were very rarely carried out within the organisation. For some individuals this meant that it was only worthwhile to register for NVQ Units or that there would be delays in achieving the whole NVQ.

Other people had carried out relevant activities in the past, but had no evidence to show for it: either no written evidence had ever existed or it was lost in an organisation to which they no longer had access.

6.2.3 Accreditation of prior learning (APL)

Because APL is intended to recognise individuals' prior achievements, it was expected that it would be more appropriate for experienced candidates than assessing them on current work performance. In practice, candidates and assessors found that the process of demonstrating that activities had been performed to the required standard in the past was very time-consuming, and sometimes impossible — because the evidence was no longer available. It turned out to be more straightforward to start from scratch and organise assessment as if the candidate were new to the work.

However, a dislike of being treated in the same way as less experienced candidates may have been a factor influencing some people to say that NVQs were more appropriate for newcomers than for people like themselves with experience.

6.2.4 Dealing with the awarding and other national bodies

The fact that different awarding bodies had different requirements and procedures on assessment, verification and certification caused considerable work for training departments, work which they felt should be unnecessary under a coherent national system. Moreover training departments which organised assessment both in England and Scotland had to deal with SCOTVEC as well. Some of those responsible for organising assessment wished that the system could be changed so that Awarding Bodies recognised each other's arrangements for assessment.

6.3 Company implementation

6.3.1 NVQ awareness

Interviews helped explain the survey finding that a few candidates were ill-informed about NVQs (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2). In one case the NVQ had been introduced in an engineering training workshop alongside another qualification, and assessment carried out by cross-referencing from records used for that. Thus the trainees had not experienced assessment specifically in relation to the NVQ, and were very unclear about what the NVQ was. They were pleased to learn during interviews that it was a national qualification and to find out that it was part of a broader national system. The key

issue for them was which type of qualification would have greater credibility with employers — but having more than one must be good.

Candidates who understood what the NVQ was were anxious that other people in the workplace should also know about them both in order to give them support and to recognise the nature of their achievement. It was vital that a candidate's own manager should be aware because they needed time and permission to spend time on collecting evidence, gaining experience of new aspects of the work, and being assessed. All were likely to involve time away from normal duties.

There was a feeling among many candidates that NVQs did not get sufficient recognition within the company as a whole and that therefore their own achievements were not being appreciated. In a company where it had been decided by management that the NVQ was too easy for the grade of employees where it had been piloted, candidates disagreed with this evaluation. One of them remarked that:

'maybe some of the senior managers should come out to do some assessing and see what's really involved'.

6.3.2 Level of support

In general it appeared that candidates were receiving adequate training and/or support while working towards their NVQ. On occasion, however, some training managers were carrying a very heavy load of responsibility because they were the guinea pigs working towards Management NVQs and/or the Assessment Units D32 and 33, at the same time as setting up and running the NVQ system for others. Such individuals tended to be on their own within the workplace, because no-one knew more about NVQs than they did. Guidance was available sometimes from an external training provider, but not always easily accessible. Sometimes external training providers were said themselves to be finding their way and unable to provide the reassurance needed.

6.3.3 Candidates' and assessors' time

The attraction of NVQs for some people was that they assumed they would not have to do work in their own time. This proved unrealistic for candidates working for NVQs in Business Administration and Management where the process of providing and presenting written evidence turned out to be extremely time-consuming. Most of these candidates found themselves doing work at home, in most cases only two hours a week, but occasionally much more.

Those responsible for organising assessment reported that some people had dropped out, and the difficulty of finding time was thought to be the main reason — either because of pressure of work within the workplace itself, or because candidates were unable or unwilling to do work at home.

Feelings were divided about how much of their own time candidates should be expected to give. It seemed reasonable for individuals to give some of their own time for a qualification which would be of personal benefit; but on the other hand people with heavy domestic responsibilities, in practice mainly women, were more likely than others to lose out on the opportunity. This could also be a problem for the employer if NVQs were being used as an instrument to raise standards.

Some candidates reported difficulty finding time to be assessed because of pressure of work, and the same difficulty could apply to the release of assessors for that purpose. Assessors sometimes found the only way they could accommodate the extra work involved was to take more work home in the evenings.

In one company, when certain parts of an NVQ were very rarely performed, it had been necessary to set up special working arrangements at sites different from the one where candidates usually worked, and this had obviously involved a considerable amount of administration on the part of assessors. The NVQ in question was being piloted and it was necessary to complete the trial within a six month period. Even without this time constraint, such arrangements might turn out to be necessary if there was a desire for candidates to complete the NVQ within a reasonable period.

6.3.4 Organising the assessment process

In most of the case study organisations investigated, the training of assessors had not been difficult. With relatively few people involved, it had been done by a mixture of formal courses, cascading, and the sharing of experience among those who were in the early stages of carrying out assessment.

However, in the health trust where NVQs had been launched on a large scale, there had been problems at the stage where staff members, mostly female, had completed their initial training and needed to complete it by being observed carrying out their assessment of candidates. In practice many of them had failed to report back that they were ready for this assessment, probably because they lacked confidence, and thus there had been delays in completing the process.

In another large organisation where assessment was organised centrally, some NVQ candidates had similarly failed to ask for assessment to be carried out because they lacked confidence in their ability to meet the standard. Again assessment would be carried out by a person other than their own line manager, and this may have contributed to candidates' unwillingness to come forward.

This finding demonstrates that whereas one of the attractions of NVQs — to women candidates in particular (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3) — was the fact that learning and practice can be done on the job, and there is no written examination, assessment could still be threatening.

6.3.5 Working at an appropriate standard

Assessors reported difficulties in interpreting performance criteria for various NVQs and also in knowing what standard to require. Guidance from awarding bodies was sometimes inadequate. However, most also said that such difficulties had largely been resolved with experience. There tended to be anxiety among assessors when starting out in case their standards were too lax. In the event internal verifiers had often found that the standard achieved was higher than that expected by the external verifier, and also that assessors were providing more written information in their records than was necessary.

Those responsible for organising assessment were confident that their company's standards were high, and were doubtful whether other employers were providing the same standard. Some thought that the same standard could be assured without the full panoply of paperwork and assessment currently required by NVQs. In one case the company was hoping to persuade the Lead Body to base award of NVQs on a ticklist and line managers' comments using the existing internal appraisal system. The assessors themselves, however, appeared satisfied with the usual NVQ system.

Two companies had felt that the external verifiers who were first appointed had a misunderstanding of what was appropriate and realistic for workplace learning and assessment, probably because they had college backgrounds. The awarding bodies had in each case since appointed a different external verifier with whom the employer felt there was a better understanding and relationship.

6.3.6 The learning curve and costs

The fact that various difficulties associated with the assessment process had been ironed out, and that other problems were beginning to be tackled through better organisation, led to a view among many of those involved that experience would gradually make the whole process of NVQ implementation smoother. The development phase was necessarily demanding of time and effort, and thus of costs, but these could be expected to diminish as people learned and systems became established.

6.4 Summary

During the interviews, NVQ candidates volunteered that NVQs were more relevant than academic qualifications because they were practical and related to the workplace, gave recognition of what the individual had achieved at work, and raised standards of performance. Much of what had been learned had come from the process of preparing for assessment rather than as a result of formal training.

Assessors commented that NVQs led to systematic coverage of performance, improved candidates' understanding of the job, and contributed to team-building, confidence and morale. Use of NVQs had also contributed to assessors' performance through

communication with candidates and greater attention to performance related issues.

The main failings of NVQs were jargon and paperwork. Few objections were expressed about the match between an NVQ and the job, but in practice providing the evidence for parts of an NVQ which were rarely performed could be difficult. Meeting the requirements of different awarding bodies, NCVQ and SCOTVEC, was inefficient and time-wasting as far as internal verifiers were concerned.

Problems arising from the ways companies implemented NVQs included low awareness of NVQs among some candidates and line managers, a feeling that NVQs had inadequate recognition, and NVQs taking up more of candidates' and assessors' time than expected. APL was found to be more time-consuming than compiling evidence afresh. Problems were also reported of assessors failing to complete their training, initial difficulties in agreeing on an appropriate standard of assessment and sometimes inappropriate expectations on the part of external verifiers.

Some of these difficulties were beginning to be ironed out, and there was an expectation that using NVQs would gradually become a smoother and less costly process.

7. Emerging Good Practice

In this chapter we review the experience of companies who participated in the research in order to identify the lessons they have learned about effective implementation of NVQs. The suggestions in the summary on good practice are our interpretation and synthesis of a variety of approaches observed in companies.

The difficulties we described in the last chapter, associated with the implementation of NVQs, must be read in the context of the high level of satisfaction among NVQ candidates shown both in the survey and during interviews. It is also clear that some of the problems are of the kind to be expected whenever something new and unfamiliar is introduced: to a large extent time and experience will cure them.

Those who are just starting out, however, can learn from the experience of those who have gone before and the following guidelines cover such points. Other companies who have been involved for some time have not faced the task of setting up and running a system involving large numbers of employees. The guidelines also take account of the experience of employers who have used NVQs or comparable competence-based systems on a large scale.

The main message is the importance of good communication at all levels. In this crucial respect the effective implementation of NVQs involves exactly the same management strategies and skills as would the introduction of any other new idea or system.

7.1 Organising the NVQ and assessment system

7.1.1 Integrating NVQs with other aspects of HRD management

The most obvious application of NVQs within an HRD strategy is in organisations which have identified the potential of NVQs to help promote line managers' responsibility for appraisal, coaching, and quality assurance. NVQs and assessor training for them need to be explained and supported as part of a general strategy for line managers' development, which might involve a phased programme of giving all the opportunity to achieve a management NVQ.

If supervisors and first line managers are to act as assessors it is important that NVQ related activity replaces or modifies the previous systems for which managers had responsibility such as appraisal or recruitment. This may not be immediately possible when NVQs are

being used only within certain parts of the organisation, so the long term aim should be explained to supervisors and managers who are co-operating in the NVQ system, and they should know exactly what is expected of them in the meantime. Clearly NVQ responsibilities are less likely to be welcome if they overlap confusingly with pre-existing tasks.

7.1.2 Planning the introduction of NVQs

The most important initial decision is the scale on which NVQs will be introduced. It seems clear that experience first on a limited scale will clarify many issues and ease the task of introducing NVQs widely. Whether NVQs are introduced in one department, used within a branch, or ultimately within the whole organisation, the same questions about awareness raising, who will carry out assessment, and how that will be organised all apply (see Sections 7.1.3 to 7.1.5 below).

A point which was repeated many times by those with first hand experience of NVQs is that the best way of understanding what NVQs involve is to take one. Thus managers who themselves have experience of an NVQ, whether in Management, for their own specialist occupational area, or through the Assessor Units, will be in an excellent position to give support and advice to their own staff. Having been assessed is an invaluable way of sensitising oneself to the anxiety a candidate is likely to feel about being assessed, and helps assessors carry out their task tactfully.

Moreover, those who have experience of achieving NVQs, whether managers or others, are likely to be enthusiastic about them and keen to promote them throughout the company. Involving successful candidates in this way can be planned ahead for the second stage.

7.1.3 Internal or external assessment

The great majority of large employers appear to be using internal assessors, partly because of the advantages just described of involving supervisors and line managers in the assessment process, and partly because of the scale of activity involved.

However, there may be circumstances where it would be more appropriate to use external assessors, for instance for a specialist occupational area involving relatively few employees and where there is little staff turnover. In these conditions it would be inappropriate to train internal assessors because employees could achieve the NVQ over a short timescale and then there would be no need in future for assessments to be carried out regularly.

7.1.4 Setting up a support system for trainee assessors

The role of assessor may be somewhat intimidating to some individuals, and they may be uncertain about how to make a start in practice even after receiving introductory training.

When NVQs are introduced in only one area, and those preparing for assessment are trained in one group, assessor trainees are likely to maintain contact with each other and give each other support. However, when numbers are larger and assessor candidates more scattered, the individuals in question may feel isolated and anxious about being assessed as an assessor, especially if that assessment will be done by someone unfamiliar to them.

For these reasons it is essential to have a good support system for assessors which:

- gives trainee assessors dates by which they are expected to be ready for assessment
- monitors the rate at which trainee assessors are making requests to be assessed and contacts them if necessary to offer assessment
- provides support for assessors while they are undergoing the process of being assessed
- provides information to trainee assessors about candidates who require assessment.

All this implies that for the period when assessor training is being organised it is necessary to have in place staff who are dedicated to the process. Trainee assessors need to have someone they can contact easily for support, information and advice, and the knowledge that an organiser will be contacting them to check on progress.

7.1.5 Awareness

The main hazard when introducing NVQs on a small scale is that insufficient thought is given to the identity and numbers of people likely to be affected. Most of the difficulties reported by candidates and assessors under this heading arose in companies where NVQs had been introduced on a small scale or as an add-on to an existing system. As a result few people knew about them, they were not a priority for the organisation as a whole, and consequently candidates could feel let down when a manager or supervisor whose co-operation was needed did not understand what was involved.

Managers whose subordinates need release are more likely to be willing if they understand what NVQs are and were consulted about their subordinates' involvement. If candidates will be sent to departments other than their own in order to learn functions outside their normal range, staff in those departments also need to know about NVQs in general and the particular one affecting them.

Whatever the scale of NVQ implementation, effective dissemination of information about them will involve:

- making sure that awareness-raising includes all those who will be affected directly or indirectly
- providing well presented background information about the nature of NVQs
- informing staff about how NVQs fit into the company's overall HRD strategy

- ensuring that individuals who are personally involved as candidates, trainers or assessors are adequately informed about what the use of an NVQ will involve for them.

If NVQs are going company wide, the campaign will have to be geared to cover everyone.

7.2 Working with candidates

7.2.1 Simplifying the language

Opinion appears to be divided among trainers about how much of a problem the jargon of NVQs is. Some take the view that coming to terms with the language extends people's vocabulary and is part of the learning process. Others see it as an off-putting and unnecessary obstacle. Candidates themselves are divided (see Fig. 5.6, Chapter 6).

The task of re-writing an NVQ into simpler language is obviously considerable, but one or two employers were undertaking it for certain NVQs. For example the NVQ original of:

'Potential hazards to the well-being of self and others are recognised, rectified and/or reported...'

was translated into:

'Your work should be clear of 'clutter' and any obtrusive objects. If any faults/failures occur, guidelines are followed correctly and sensibly to avoid any damage to self or equipment.'

7.2.2 Estimating the time involved

While this report has provided some evidence about the time taken by candidates (see Sections 2.6, 4.1.2 and 6.3.3), and the number of candidates an assessor can manage (see 7.5.1), it would be rash to make generalisations about the time candidates might expect to take during working hours and away from work. This is bound to vary according to the NVQ, the individual, and working conditions.

Nonetheless it is important that managers whose staff are to be involved, and assessors, should be given an honest estimate of how much time they will need away from the job, and given advice about how to deal with NVQ activity compared with other priorities. If the company has no prior experience of NVQs it should be made clear that the time allowance is only an initial judgment. Those with experience will be in a better position to say.

Potential candidates should also be told how much company time can be used and told in advance if they will be expected to do any further work in their own time.

In order to build a basis for future predictions it would be helpful for candidates and assessors to keep a log of the time they are taking, and to report it. If the reality is wildly different from the first

estimate, this should be acknowledged and dealt with, because otherwise the difficulties which result will affect NVQ achievement and credibility.

Further comments on the use of time are made in Section 7.4.4.

7.2.3 Getting started

Candidates and assessors alike reported initial alarm when seeing the NVQ paperwork, and incomprehension of what they would have to do. Everyone also reported the relief they felt as soon as they got started: doing it made sense of the written material.

So the way in which the NVQ is introduced is obviously very important. After a presentation and opportunity for questions and discussion, some immediate one-to-one work seemed to be essential in order to plan activity which the candidate would be able to follow. It was best to take just one Element or Unit which would be straightforward to achieve and concentrate on that before developing a longer term action plan. This initial guidance could be given by a trainer and/or assessor, and ideally the candidate should be able to contact that person for further advice.

Where external training providers were used, an effective method was for them to run an introductory workshop for all candidates, with one-to-one action planning included. Further workshops could be provided when candidates reached an agreed stage in their action plans.

Showing candidates an example of a completed portfolio considerably helped their understanding of what they had to do, and helped reassure them about the possibility of completing an unfamiliar task. Provided assessors were checking the authenticity of candidates' work through observation and/or questioning, there should be no danger of direct copying.

7.2.4 Keeping up the momentum

The main factor which maintains candidates in making progress is their keeping in touch with the task, and contact with others who are involved is an important way of doing this.

To some extent maintaining that contact is the task of those organising the system overall. However, candidates can also benefit from taking part in self-help groups with other candidates or in regular meetings led by an assessor. Some self-help groups operate most of the time on their own, but invite an assessor in when they need advice on particular points to do with the choice or presentation of evidence.

It is a natural part of such meetings to agree on a date for the next one, and having such dates to work to is the discipline which helps many people progress. Without such discipline, work on the NVQ may progressively be put off when in competition with other pressures, and eventually the aim be abandoned altogether.

7.2.5 Giving recognition

When individuals achieve their NVQ or the Units for which they are aiming, it appears to be very worthwhile to mark the event publicly, either through a presentation or in company wide publicity material. If individuals' achievements are ignored or taken for granted some of the motivational gains acquired from offering the NVQ can be lost.

7.3 Quality issues

7.3.1 Occupational competence of assessors

For the most part this was not an issue because most companies were training as assessors supervisors and managers who were experienced in the work they were assessing. However, the question could arise when external assessors were used, because for external providers there were economies in having multi-occupational assessors. It would also be possible for companies with in-house assessors to use them for occupations other than their own.

To the extent that internal assessors and training departments were aware of this issue they felt strongly that assessors should be skilled and experienced in the areas they were assessing, and that there were risks to quality in any other arrangement¹.

7.3.2 Methods of assessment

All those who had contributed to the assessment process emphasised the importance of being well prepared before carrying out an assessment. The assessor needs time to check his/her understanding of the performance criteria and accompanying requirements for each Element, and time to check on the candidate's progress to date. Such preparation helps give the candidate confidence in the assessor, and avoids misunderstandings which could jeopardise that trust.

In general there appeared to be no problems about deciding on the balance between observation, scrutiny of written evidence and questioning of candidates for particular NVQs. To a large extent the nature of the work and of the NVQ determined what was appropriate.

However, in the case of the Business Administration NVQ there appeared to be a choice. In one company, assessment had originally been done primarily by observation and questioning. This was extremely time-consuming for assessors, and also seemed rather inappropriate for candidates who were very experienced and reaching the required standard without difficulty. So the company was turning instead to asking candidates to produce paper-based portfolios of evidence. This required more input from candidates but used assessor

¹ '...the awarding body should specify the occupational competence or experience considered necessary.....' NCVQ (1993) *The awarding bodies' common accord*.

time more efficiently. Assessors and candidates felt there was no difference in the quality of what was achieved.

Assessors had also discovered it was not necessary to check, on each occasion, requirements on health and safety which appeared with every Element of an engineering NVQ; assessors could use their discretion about those occasions on which something new in the situation made it relevant to raise the subject again.

7.3.3 Reliability and validity of assessment

The comparison of different assessors' interpretation in order to achieve a consistent approach is essential for reliability and validity in the assessment process. On the self-help principle just described, assessors can maintain their own motivation by meeting together, discuss how they are interpreting the performance criteria, and at the same time raise and discuss any difficulties they are having in carrying out assessment.

Internal verifiers can contribute to the same process for assessors who cannot meet together by passing on what has been learned from one to another. The verifier, of course, has a general responsibility to maintain quality in the assessment process. Assessors appeared to welcome the opportunity to have comments made on the way in which they carried out assessment, and were eager to improve.

7.3.4 Time, costs and quality

The use of NVQs unavoidably involves time, and to date there is no reliable information about the cost of this to employers². While the terms of the research did not allow for an investigation of quality beyond taking account of the views of those involved with NVQs, their comments tended to suggest that in certain respects procedures which helped promote quality might also lead to more efficient use of time.

This appears to be the case in connection with the various types of meetings and self-help groups just described. Meetings between one assessor and a group of candidates is obviously better use of the assessor's time than a series of meetings one-to-one. Meetings among assessors both improve the quality of assessment and prevent the assessors going down procedural blind alleys which ultimately would waste time. Similarly, meetings among candidates enable them to compare notes about how to meet the performance criteria and help maintain motivation. This means that the time and cost of registering a candidate have not been wasted.

In some cases such meetings take place at least partly in employees' own time, and there was also evidence from the research that many candidates and assessors did work related to NVQs at home. So if

² The Employment Department is commissioning research on this to be carried out during the first half of 1994.

employers' time is being invested in NVQs, they are often getting some return in terms of extra employee effort.

7.4 Maintaining the system

7.4.1 Matching candidates with assessors

In companies with a fairly steady staff turnover and with the ultimate aim of making NVQs available to all employees, a long term solution to the problem of having an assessor available in the right place at the right time, whenever required, may be to have all line managers and supervisors trained as assessors. However, as far as we know, the feasibility and effectiveness of this has yet to be demonstrated. The health trust provider which faced the complication of shifts when organising assessment found that the difficulty was greatly eased by having a good supply of assessors. If assessors were working in the same location as candidates, assessment could be carried out during working hours, during a night shift if necessary.

During initial trials of NVQs, some employers found that when assessors were giving guidance in advance about appropriate evidence as well as carrying out the assessment, each assessor could deal with only two candidates. However, after this initial experience assessors were deemed capable of taking responsibility for four. In this case the organisation of assessment overall was done by having one organiser (or internal verifier) to six assessors and twenty candidates. Another employer found the process of giving guidance and carrying out assessment could be managed satisfactorily for up to six candidates at a time. Under these circumstances the assessor and his/her candidates took responsibility for arranging their own meetings and times for assessment.

An organisation whose assessors were more widely scattered and where a variety of NVQs were in use, had introduced an electronic diary system in order to provide information readily about the location of NVQ candidates who were ready for assessment and suitable assessors who were available to carry out assessment. Obviously this system could also be used for dealing with assessment for trainee assessors.

7.4.2 Keeping records

The importance of record keeping is illustrated by the last section and also by the need to monitor assessor candidates' progress (Section 7.1.4).

The points about providing a support system for assessor candidates are to some extent relevant to any group of NVQ candidates. Whereas they are more likely than assessor candidates to have colleagues doing the NVQ alongside them, and thus to be less isolated, there are any number of factors which may slow down progress on the NVQ.

This may not become apparent to those organising the system as a whole, especially when NVQs are being used very widely, unless there is system for monitoring progress, and a method for making contact and checking progress with individuals where necessary. That system could be based on reports from assessors who are responsible for a given number of candidates, rather than by direct contact between the centre and individual candidates.

7.5 Summary

This chapter provides a number of findings on good practice relevant to those implementing NVQs, whether they are using them for the first time or extending their use. Here we summarise the main points.

Those organising the NVQ and assessment system are recommended to take into account the need to:

- Integrate NVQs into the wider organisational strategy
- Introduce NVQs initially on a pilot basis
- Plan the stages by which NVQs will be further implemented
- Take the level of long term need into account when deciding whether to train assessors in-house
- Provide a support system for line managers and supervisors who are training as assessors
- Provide adequate information for all those who are likely to be affected by NVQ activity.

Those working directly with candidates are recommended to:

- Consider whether there is value for a particular NVQ and group of candidates in re-writing the NVQ into simpler language
- Be honest about the time NVQs are estimated to take up during working hours and from employees' own time, and monitor the time it actually takes
- Draw up with each individual a manageable action plan which will enable them to make progress on just one Element or Unit in the first instance
- Ensure candidates maintain the momentum by encouraging them to keep in touch with others who are doing the NVQ, for instance through self-help groups, and setting targets
- Make sure that achievement of an NVQ always gets public recognition.

Those responsible for quality assurance are recommended to:

- Be sure that assessors have enough knowledge and experience of the occupation to be able to make valid assessments of competence
- Make it clear that assessors are expected to be properly prepared for carrying out assessments

- Provide means by which assessors can compare notes on how they are interpreting NVQs and the standards they are using, and ensure that feedback from the verification system is communicated to them
- Encourage group working among candidates and assessors both for quality of outcomes and good use of time.

Those responsible for keeping the system running are recommended to:

- Investigate computerised systems for putting candidates and assessors in touch with each other if large numbers of people are involved in different locations
- Combine the keeping of records with a system for maintaining contact with candidates and assessors.

Appendix 1: The Survey

1. Design of questionnaire and pilot

A draft version of the questionnaire was designed after discussions with HRD managers in three of the case study organisations. It was sent to all case study employers for comment, and one arranged for a group of employees to answer it. Some minor amendments were made as a result.

2. Distribution of questionnaire and response rate

Questionnaires were distributed by the participating employers to individuals identified by them and respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaire to IMS. This arrangement meant that it was not possible for IMS to address reminders to those who had received the questionnaire, and this is likely to have affected the response rate.

Employers distributed 704 questionnaires in total, and of these almost one third went to trainees. Two hundred and seventy two usable questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 39 per cent. The response rate from trainees as a sub-group was somewhat higher than that from employees. As a result employees comprise 58 per cent of the achieved sample and trainees 42 per cent.

3. NVQs used by respondents

	N	%
Business Administration	29	11
Customer Service	6	2
Hairdressing	40	15
Health Care and Nursing	45	17
Management	32	12
Mechanical and Electrical Engineering	63	23
Process Operations	17	6
Telecommunications	3	1
Vehicle Engineering	8	3
Not identified	29	11
Total	272	100

Ten of the employers participating in the survey had some candidates following Business Administration and/or Management. Other NVQs were confined to one or at most two employers.

4. Tables

Table 1. Age and employment status of respondents

Age	N	YT (%)	ET (%)	Employee (%)
16-19 Years	107	95	68	12
20-25 Years	21	5	3	11
26-40 Years	75	0	16	41
41-50 Years	45	0	7	26
51+ Years	21	0	7	10

N=269

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 2. Respondents' work experience

Number of years	With present employer		Current work with present employer		Previous work with prior employer	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 year or less	7	5	15	11	122	65
1 to 2 years	7	5	20	15	9	5
>2 and <5	40	29	54	40	15	8
>5 and <10	23	17	29	21	18	10
Over 10 years	60	44	18	13	25	13
Totals	137	100	136	100	189*	100

* includes Employment Trainees

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 3. Vocational qualifications held by respondents

Qualification	N	%
BTEC	34	37
City and Guilds	31	34
Work related certificate/diploma	15	16
RSA Diploma	8	9
OND	8	9
Degree	4	4
HNC	3	3
MBA/Part MBA	2	2
Other	16	17

N = 92

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 4. Ethnicity of respondents

Ethnic Origin	N	%
White	241	91
Black—Caribbean	7	3
Black—African	3	1
Indian	6	2
Did not wish to say	8	3
Total	265	100

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 5. Training provision

Training Provision	N	%
Training on the job provided by a supervisor or manager	122	45
Guidance from a colleague or manager on how to collect the evidence	99	37
Attendance at training sessions run by the organisation's training staff	157	58
Attendance at a course(s) run by an external organisation	57	21
Use of distance learning materials	33	12
No training provided	7	3
Not yet started NVQ related training	3	1
Other	12	4

N = 270

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 6. Satisfaction with training provided

Level of satisfaction	N	%
Very satisfactory	90	39
Fairly satisfactory	105	45
Neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory	23	10
Fairly unsatisfactory	8	3
Very unsatisfactory	7	3

N = 233

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 7. Arrangements for assessment of candidates

Arrangement for assessment	N	%
Own supervisor or manager	66	25
Another manager/ supervisor from within the organisation	49	19
A specially appointed assessor from outside the organisation	45	17
By the organisations' training staff	82	31
In normal working conditions on the job	69	26
In the usual training place	71	27
Away from the normal place of work/ training	28	11
Do not know	2	1

N = 261

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 8. Satisfaction with assessment

Level of satisfaction	N	%
Very satisfactory	96	49
Fairly satisfactory	78	40
Neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory	15	8
Fairly unsatisfactory	3	2
Very unsatisfactory	3	2

N = 195

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Table 9. Responses to positive statements about NVQs

Statement	N	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)
One of the main benefits of an NVQ is gaining a nationally recognised qualification	268	95	3	1
I like the fact that so much learning and practice can be done on the job	268	72	21	7
I would not want to do a qualification which mainly involved written exams	269	59	20	21
Doing the NVQ makes/made me feel that the importance of my work is recognised	267	58	30	13
Working for an NVQ helps you do the job better	270	54	34	11

Source: IMS Survey 1993

Appendix 2: Glossary of Terms

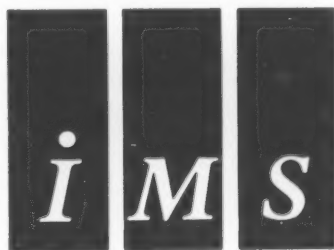
Accreditation	Approval by NCVQ/SCOTVEC of an Awarding Body and/or their awards, as part of the NVQ/SVQ framework.
Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)	A process leading to the identification, assessment and certification of a person's vocationally relevant past.
Assessment	The process of making judgements, based on evidence collected, about individual competence.
Assessor	The individual responsible for measuring the competence of the trainee against the written criteria.
Award	A term used to describe what the individual receives on achieving an NVQ/SVQ.
Awarding Body	A group or organisation approved by NCVQ/SCOTVEC to provide NVQ/SVQ awards.
Certificate	The document which the individual receives from an Awarding Body. It provides evidence that an NVQ/SVQ, or units of competence have been achieved.
Element	The smallest 'chunk' of activity which can be credited towards the achievement of a unit of competence or an NVQ.
Lead Body	The body responsible for setting standards. These groups are predominantly employer led.
LEC	Local Enterprise Company. The body appointed to instigate, monitor and support local training initiatives in Scotland. It is made up, principally, of local employers.
MCI	Management Charter Initiative. The Lead Body responsible for the production of occupational standards for managers throughout all employment areas.
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications. The body responsible for validating/accrediting standards/awards/Awarding Bodies in England and Wales.
NROVA	National Record of Vocational Achievement. The individual's record of training and experience received, along with recordings of awards and credits towards awards.

NVQ	National Vocational Qualification. An award accredited by NCVQ, incorporated into the NVQ framework. Evidence of competence in a given occupational area.
NVQ Framework	A national system, which places individual NVQs into their appropriate occupations and levels of competence.
Occupational Standards	Statements of the standards of performance required for jobs and published by Lead Bodies.
Performance Criteria	Indicate the standard of performance, and describe the activities relating to specific elements of competence.
Progression	Moving through the NVQ framework, either from one level to a higher level, or across occupational boundaries.
Provider	Training provider. Organisation or employer with primary responsibility for providing appropriate training to enable trainee learning.
Qualification	The formal recognition that the defined standard has been achieved.
SCOTVEC	The body responsible for the validation/accreditation of standard/awards/Awarding Bodies, in Scotland.
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification. The equivalent, in Scotland, of the NVQ in England and Wales.
TDLB	Training and Development Lead Body. This body represents a cross-section of organisations and institutions in the training sphere. They are responsible for deriving standards for training and assessment.
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council. A body, mainly composed of local employers, appointed to instigate/monitor/support training initiatives in England and Wales.
Unit	A 'chunk' of work activity large enough to be of value to an employer. It is capable of being certificated independently, and of constituting a credit towards an NVQ/SVQ award. It is comprised of a number of elements of competence.
Verification	The process of ensuring that the standard is being maintained, and that appropriate systems are in place.
Verifier	Individual appointed to ensure the maintenance of the standard, in keeping with the Awarding Body's requirements. Verifiers may be internal, officers of the Approved Assessment Centre, or external, appointed by the Awarding Body.

IMPLEMENTING NVQS:

The experience of employers, employees and trainees, Toye J, Vigor P. *Report 265*, 1994. ISBN 1-85184-190-3.

While many large employers have some experience of NVQs, decisions have still to be made about whether to become fully committed. The purpose of this report, which concentrates on use of NVQs within large organisations, is to help inform those decisions. It complements recent IMS research about employers' attitudes by exploring the factors influencing employers' future intentions and reporting on the experience of NVQ candidates.



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